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Swimming in the afternoon: adapting Kafka's *The Trial**

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ABSTRACT

Recent anniversary productions of *The Trial* have demonstrated that Kafka's literary and juridical imagination remains a generative resource for wider legal critique. This essay examines two recent theatrical and audio performances of *The Trial*: Anmol Vellani's *Innocence*, a stage reworking which premiered in Bangalore, and Ed Harris's *The Trial*, a BBC radio play that compresses Kafka's text into a single hour of drama. In tracing how these works retool the novel's attention to procedural opacity for modern audiences, the essay argues that the Kafkaesque is a live aesthetic mode through which anxieties about surveillance, state power, and legal precarity are articulated. Vellani's production foregrounds the weaponisation of law in India's present while Harris's radio drama emphasizes the collapsing distinction between public and private life in contemporary Britain. Counterpointing these adaptations against film versions by Orson Welles and David Jones (by way of Harold Pinter), the essay reflects on why *The Trial* resonates in the twenty-first century, identifying its qualities for transmedial teleportation that extends its reach across stage, sound, and screen.

KEYWORDS Kafka; *The Trial*; law and literature; Orson Welles; Harold Pinter; Anmol Vellani; BBC radio; legal precarity; surveillance; state power; Kafkaesque; adaptation

A couple of years ago I was gifted a diary produced and sold by the London Review of Books. Unusually, for what was intended as a private journal, it had a title: *52 Ways of Thinking about Kafka*. Engineered in the calendar format, it supplied one thought for each week of the year, and in doing so, merged several other assorted functions. Intended to mark the centenary of Kafka's death, it interleaved published excerpts on the author from selected *Review* contributors; it inserted melancholy entries from his diaries in the

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**Innocence*, a play by Anmol Vellani, which debuted at the Goethe-Institute/Max Mueller Bhavan, Bangalore, India in May 2024 and *Franz Kafka – The Trial*, a radio play, adapted by Ed Harris, directed by Anne Isger and starring Iwan Rheon, first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in June 2024 and currently available on *BBC Sounds*.

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corresponding dates; and it afforded a negligible amount of space for the holder to jot down their own musings and appointments. Frankly, I found its practical multiplicity tricky to navigate, and it eventually worked its way to the bottom of a pile perched on my desk. That was not the only reason for its resettlement. I had begun to feel unease at how my banal scribbles were stacking up next to Kafka's visceral logging of his most severe neuroses, humbled by his sporadic tendency to effortlessly position the political next to the personal, on occasions where he juxtaposed grander notices with more mundane concerns: '2 August. Germany has declared war on Russia. Swimming in the afternoon'.¹

This specific, marketable, and somewhat unique remediation of Kafka's writing gestures towards his admirably wide and persistent cultural influence. His most famous, unfinished novel, *The Trial* (1925), in which the protagonist Josef K. stands accused of an unstated crime, has remained a vital text for exploring the implacable and nonsensical features of the law, as well as for its broader satire of pernicious and absurd bureaucracies that extend across modern corporate life. Since its first publication in 1925, *The Trial* has been adapted many times across theatre, cinema, and radio. Recent tributes, marking the centenary of Kafka's death, have led to a further proliferation of reworkings and translations that employ a range of curatorial media including exhibitions, concerts, readings, and film programmes.² Kafka's philosophical power lends itself to this kind of transmedial teleportation, but these modes should interrogate rather than minimize his fundamental literariness. The formal, narratological, and stylistic facets are why, after all, Kafka's novels are particularly popular with readers, critics, playwrights, filmmakers, and jurisprudence scholars alike. As David Gurnham notes in his spry editorial for the recent *Law and Humanities* Shakespeare issue, *The Trial*, along with *The Castle* (1926), 'continue to generate most discussion' in Kafka's oeuvre, because they offer compelling intellectual frameworks for parsing ongoing legal disputes such as the British Post Office Horizon scandal.³

To expand this understanding of Kafka's contemporary appeal across law and literature, I focus on two recent adaptations of *The Trial*. Anmol Vellani's *Innocence* (2024) is a theatrical interpretation which claims to be 'conversing' with Kafka's canonical work, situating its tale in response to the creeping authoritarianism in Indian politics.⁴ Ed Harris's BBC radio play *The Trial*

¹LRB *Diary for 2024: 52 Ways of Thinking about Kafka* (Profile Books 2023).

²See, for example, *Kafka on Film Season* (Oxford Kafka Research Centre, September 2024) <www.kafka-research.ox.ac.uk/event/kafka-on-film-season-october-2024> accessed 30 August 2025 and the *Illustrations for Franz Kafka* visual art exhibition, Kunstforum Ostdeutsche Galerie Regensburg, Germany reviewed by Ian Ellison in this Special Issue.

³David Gurnham, 'Editorial: Kafka ... with Austen and Ishiguro?' (2024) 18(2) *Law and Humanities* 144.

⁴Anmol Vellani, 'Innocence', unpublished playscript, shared with the author by the playwright, (October 2024) 1.

(2024) is in some ways a more straightforward revision that compresses Kafka's book into a single hour of drama, adjusting the story to a vaguely approximated present tense where industrial action and home unrest rumble impatiently in the narrative background. Treatments of the law in both adaptations are essentially similar, in that the law is encountered exclusively as an external, unknowable force and entirely through K.'s restricted perspective. In this way, both adaptations are faithful to Kafka's authorial approach, which never breaks from a third-person focalization of K.'s activities and interactions during the novel. This essay therefore attends to recent dramatic and audio performances of *The Trial* for two main purposes: first, to highlight how these versions re-shade Kafka's literary and juridical imagination; second, to examine how these new engagements deploy Kafka's writing to articulate the prevailing legal and political challenges of the twenty-first century.

In their bad books

A Toto Funds the Arts production, *Innocence* premiered at the Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan in Bangalore on 10th May 2024. Written and directed by Vellani, an experienced theatre practitioner, the play locates the plot of *The Trial* in present-day India, emphasizing and embellishing the darkly comic aspects of Kafka's text. This approach is deployed for the purposes of critique, capturing the purported erosion of institutional norms and government transparency in the country. As Vellani himself stated: 'I felt less like I was writing an adaptation of *The Trial* and more like I was mediating a conversation between the novel and the emerging India of the twenty-first-century'. Vellani, who wrote the play between 2017 and 2021, has been forthcoming about choosing the idiom of black comedy, which he argues, like Kafka's prose, 'produces discordance between style and content', and because characters 'act as though they are unaware of the ludicrous nature of the situations they find themselves in'.⁵

The disarming quality of plain, unadorned syntax is what makes Kafka's scene-making so dramatically unsettling. Incidents that should be treated as absurd intrusions, such as when the warden tucks into K.'s birthday breakfast at the start of *The Trial*, are acknowledged but not pampered by a dogged, dispassionate narrative voice. In Kafka's novel, these events simply happen, and while K. is often aghast or irritated by the disturbances, his various antagonists are depicted as deliberately blinkered and innocuous in their dealings with him. It is Kafka's propensity to assign the straight-faced remark and deadpan rejoinder that Vellani keenly transmutes in his own

⁵Anmol Vellani, 'But is this Kafka?' (*Festival Kafka*, 2024) <<https://kafka2024.de/en/blog/anmol-vellani-but-is-this-kafka>> accessed 30 August 2025.

retelling. The wardens in the novel are refreshed as the Fat Policeman and the Tall Policeman, whom Vellani similarly renders as caustic, unhelpful interlopers: 'We are guardians of the law, that's all'.⁶ A key feature of this adaptation, then, is how the discordance between style and content is reflexively foregrounded in K.'s encounters with the law and its ancillaries.

Vellani, in his stage notes, directs that 'people laugh derisively in the adjoining room' at the point when K. is most upset at his vanquished breakfast. This technique that suggests an-audience-within-play is illustrative of many theatrical paraphrases found in Vellani's adaptation, particularly its staging. To this end, it is worth quoting the director's note in full:

Much of what is seen and heard in this play seems strange and disorienting, even surreal. No scene is lit realistically. Many things do not sound as they ordinarily do. Characters are made up and dressed outrageously. The play is ideally performed on a thrust stage, with spectators seated on three sides, for reasons that the script will make clear.⁷

Presented in order here are: (1) a sense of tone and atmosphere, cleaving closely to a widely accepted cultural interpretation of Kafka's work; (2) a broad principle for stage lighting that insists upon its unreality; (3) an aural ethos that communicates an inhuman soundscape; (4) an expectation that elaborate hair, costume, and make-up should resist monochrome dourness; and (5) an ideal setting that allows the performance to be viewed from three perspectives and which seeks to include the audience in the court scenes that are notably absent from Kafka's text. For the premiere in Bangalore, these instructions found immediate articulation in the opening scene: K. is extravagantly lit in by a 'steep white light that bounces off the table'; 'a grating, metallic sound is heard in the darkness';⁸ and the accused man wears a gaudy yellow t-shirt and pyjama bottoms, surrounded by policemen dressed in a risible mix of patterned shirts, shorts, high socks, trench coats, aviator sunglasses, and red-buckled belts. Suspended above the set for the duration of the play is an eye, one which the spectator might presume is the omniscient eye of the state. Such expressionistic audio-visual design gives the scenography the flavour of abstraction and atemporality, so in mitigation Vellani must draw out its specificity to India by scattering Hindi phrases throughout the script. Examples include *sahibs* [sirs], *randi* [whore], *lena-dena* [give and take], *bhavnaye* [feelings], *khatarnak* [dangerous], *Upar-wala* [God], and *aam aadmi* [common man].

Most of these terms are spoken by the Court Officer, whose poor grasp of English is played for amusement, while reference to the *common man* evokes the Aam Aadmi Party, a political group founded in 2012 in the wake of anti-

⁶Vellani, 'Innocence' (n 4) 3.

⁷*ibid* 2.

⁸*ibid* 2.

corruption movements that were then spreading across the country. Vellani has eagerly noted the various social, cultural and legal backdrops against which he developed this work. In an article accompanying the play, he cites the introduction of the electoral bonds scheme, nominally created to ensure transparency in India's political funding, but which holds no public record of its sources.⁹ He also remarks on an instance in which the Chief Justice of India, Ranjan Gogoi, was accused of sexual harassment but rapidly cleared of the allegations.¹⁰ For Vellani, these examples resemble the precepts of that much-disputed word, 'Kafkaesque', but he distinguishes between political events that elicit the descriptive connotations of Kafka and that which 'directly invokes Kafka's fiction'. He sees the latter sensibility exemplified by amendments to the Right to Information Act (2005) and recent incidents where Indian citizens have been imprisoned without charge after public demonstrations.¹¹

Innocence broadcasts the echoes of these cases to reframe *The Trial*. K's encounter with the court painter Teetar-batair, who provides this play's iteration of Kafka's character Titorelli, prompts the decisive exchange:

- T: They must have a reason for wanting to arrest you, K. Think, think! Maybe it's what you eat, the books you read, your online behaviour – I don't know – the people you hang out with.
- K: When did eating and reading become a crime? As for the company I keep –
- T: You're being watched, K. We're all being watched. You wouldn't know by whom. Someone you'd never suspect.
- K: But why?
- T: Because no act is innocent in their eyes. Crime or no crime, there's your politics for them to worry about.
- K: I'm sorry, what?
- T: Your politics, K! Maybe you have friends who are in their bad books. Maybe they've marked you down as a mischief-maker. Or worse: maybe they suspect you of sedition.¹²

Here, Vellani exceeds a critique of authoritarianism and, in its subtext, evokes what he sees as the totalitarian impulses of the modern Indian state. The police arrests of Amritpal Singh, the Sikh separatist, and Umar Khalid, the democratic activist, have been recently documented in international news outlets.¹³ They are brought into sharp relief in this scene, which explicitly introduces matters of sedition and patriotism in ways that are crucially absent from the equivalent Advocate section in *The Trial*. Vellani therefore

⁹Vellani, 'But is this Kafka?' (n 5).

¹⁰ibid.

¹¹ibid.

¹²Vellani, 'Innocence' (n 4) 42.

¹³See 'Amritpal Singh: Sikh Separatist Arrested After Weeks on the Run' (*BBC News*, 23 April 2023) <www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-65063620> accessed 30 August 2025; also 'Umar Khalid: Indian Activist Languishes in Jail Without Bail or Trial' (*BBC News*, 23 January 2024) <www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-67980484> accessed 20 August 2025.

elides the inaccessibility of the law, Kafka's chief concern, with the consequences of India's turn towards nationalist politics, indicating that one cannot be detached from the other.

Teetar-batair, whose name draws on the Urdu idiom *half a partridge, half a quail*, which means to confuse two similar but distinct entities, spells out the overt political dimensions of the play. By renaming him, Vellani can omit the detailed distinctions made by Titorelli in *The Trial*, who, for K's benefit, navigates the nuances of three types of legal judgement: absolute acquittal, ostensible acquittal, and indefinite postponement. These expressions do not appear in Vellani's remaking, which assigns a different narrative function to its court painter, whose role is instead to vocalize the historical imprint of the Indian caste system:

- K: They want to frame me?
 T: Uh-huh. The penny has dropped! Maybe they want to make an example of you as a warning to others.
 K: What? No, it can't be! Why would they –
 T: Simple, K. They have ends. You are the means – a bakra to be sacrificed for the greater good. Or bad.
 K: But why me of all people? I'm an honest man, I'm law-abiding –
 T: Yes, yes, I know – you've led a squeaky clean life. But here's why. All judges look the same to you, huh? Well, all bakras look the same to them. This one or that one makes no difference. You are dispensable – for reasons of state.¹⁴

By portraying the caste system as one that institutes predestined, homogeneous political identities, Vellani reinterprets Kafka's principal interests in guilt, procedural violence, and opaque lawmaking. A bakra [goat] symbolizes those citizens who exist far down the social strata, and as identified in Vellani's unwieldy dialogue, these individuals can be sacrificed for the collective population. This passage suggestively inverts Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*, which describes a person who can be killed at any time but not lawfully sacrificed. Agamben diagnoses in modern societies examples of permanent emergencies, regimes of biopower and conditions of bare life. Agamben's view is that citizens accept the bare minimum of existence to live under almost permanent restrictions of liberty. Governments treat every event as a pretext for the suspension of normal laws. Citizens adapt to the new reality: they defer to the exception, and so it becomes the rule.¹⁵

So, what relevance does Agamben's theory have in Vellani's treatise on postcolonial India? While commentators generally see Indira Gandhi's 21-month declaration of a state of emergency in 1975 as an aberration, the current Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, has been criticized for his

¹⁴Vellani, 'Innocence' (n 4) 43.

¹⁵Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Daniel Heller-Roazen tr, Stanford University Press 1998).

own autocratic tendencies. Vellani's adaptation remains conscious of but not obvious about this context, and it makes two key creative decisions in its cultural translation of Kafka's book. First, in the spirit of the protracted emergency, K.'s enervating search for absolution is extended over eight years rather than the single year depicted in the source text. Second, to augment the state of K.'s confusion, it combines the character of Leni (designated as Leena D'Cruz), a young nurse who teasingly attends to Huld, K.'s legal advocate, with the range of interlocutory women who counterpoint K in the novel. Both choices constitute a form of melodramatic overstatement, and, if nothing else, these broad strokes situate the adaptation firmly in a theatrical register, delivering an appraisal of contemporary India that is forceful, albeit somewhat unsharpened.

Crimes and misdemeanours

By comparison, Ed Harris's radio dramatization of *The Trial*, broadcast by BBC Radio 4 on 9th June 2024 and directed by Anne Isger, is mostly untethered from a discernible contemporary reality. In fact, its suggestion of a strike--fuelled civilization, beset by power outages and on the brink of public disorder, is practically oblique. The factory workers, K. notes during one interlude, hold *blank* placards during their protests. This indirect approach is, then, partly a matter of design: the production stakes its setting not on recognizable places and institutions, but on the voices from a cast of well-known British actors (including Phil Davis, Nina Wadia, Celeste Dring, and Mark Heap), who lean into broadly intoned accents that indicate their characters' region and status. The wardens are portrayed as cockney thugs, for instance, while the inspector, to whom K. is quickly introduced in the adjoining room at the start of the play, has the cut-glass elocution of a supremely educated civil servant.

Class, then, undergirds this interpretation, and it is lent greater thematic supremacy by the audio medium. The sense of disembodiment that the form encourages also animates the portrayal of K.'s professional and social isolation. Crucially, the listener becomes embroiled in the heightened tonal frequencies that typify K.'s increasingly fraught encounters with his adversaries. A colleague at the bank, Edmund (known as simply the Deputy Manager in Kafka's novel), is given an outsized role, affecting a conniving presence who magnifies K.'s legal terrors as they manifest in the workplace. While littering his speech with verbal slippages ('irregardless', 'refudiate'), Edmund's sly interrogations even take on a Freudian zest, discovering that K.'s paranoid agitation has led him to write down lists of 'misdemeanours' and 'potential detractors', in which the word 'mother' appears in both columns. The worst crime of all being, of course, that this activity has taken place on 'company time' and on 'company paper'.

It is the collapsing distinction between private and public that is most fully verbalized in Harris's script. As the otherwise malapropic Edmund makes clear, 'nothing is private' if it takes place in the municipal bank. K. solemnly ironises this observation in the following scene with his housekeeper, Mrs Godbee (known as Frau Grubach in Kafka's original text). Her moralizing insinuations lead K. to defend the honour of Miss Bürstner, his neighbour, who has been seen cavorting with several men. 'The delineation of private from public space is the cornerstone of a functioning society,' he offers to justify his uppity, but nonetheless anxious, irritation. This exchange in the boarding house is interrupted by a key musical motif, an atonal, halting rendition of Frère Jacques played on a recorder by Mrs Godbee's young nephew. Its high, abrasive pitch returns to haunt the accused throughout the narrative. The varied sound design, which incorporates the hum of crowds and choral intervals, is evocative of the unseen, perhaps inhuman, power that regularly eludes K., who vainly tries, in Leni's words, 'to stand down the glare of the machine'. The attention to mechanical supremacy also enlivens Vellani's representation, which ends with 'the sound of stones being crushed' by an apparatus that is only heard, functioning as a peripheral yet omnipotent sonic force.¹⁶

Generally, Harris's revisiting of *The Trial* lacks deference towards the more serious-minded retellings of Kafka's text. In the initial meeting with Dr Huld, K.'s ailing, supposed defence lawyer responds to Uncle Albert's entreaty for legal support: 'Come on Bertie, it's late and I'm trying to die!'. Leni, meanwhile, speaks in exclusively mocking vernacular. In a mode of metatextual self-awareness, she emphasizes the contrivance in her act of plate-smashing that lures K. into the kitchen. She also explodes the myth that Kafka leaves unresolved in the novel: that one can predict the verdict for the accused based on the shape of their lips: 'that's also bollocks, I should know'. Harris's adaptation is, on balance, wittier than Vellani's. It is also capable of segueing between jolting temporalities with less fussiness and more finesse than is achieved in *Innocence*. At several points, K. awakes as if from a dream happening in a different place and time, which helps to press forward the storyline. In a deft transition, his haughty courtroom speech blends into his idle office contemplation the following day. The anachronisms, though, are often intriguingly blurred: in one frantic conversation, K. noticeably drops coins into a payphone to maintain a defective line to Huld; in another, Edmund states imperiously that he and K. will both be working remotely from home. These disjunctions serve and modulate Kafka's intent for the modern listenership. They channel the uncomfortable experiential conditions that define his account of human life, transforming them into a stack of cultural notices that interleave the past with the present.

¹⁶Vellani, 'Innocence' (n 4) 75.

One of Harris's most overt transformations centres on the character of Block, a prattling accused man who, for even longer than K., has been held in a judicial purgatory. In the radio-play, he becomes K.'s client as well as Huld's, expressing the book's crucial parable, *Before the Law*, amid a throng of giggling, taunting children. This intelligent compression of Kafka's novel melds the speech of the prison chaplain, the cacophony of Titorelli's studio, and the servile attention Block pays towards Huld in his bedroom quarters. This dramaturgical dexterity is less apparent in Vellani's adaptation, which invents a conclusive ending that Harris's effort pointedly eschews. In the former, Leena (or Leni) shoots K. in the head and places the gun in his hand, making K.'s complicity an act of framing and a product of his misplaced infatuation. This somewhat blunt reenactment of K.'s demise is much more equivocal in Harris's portrayal, as the wardens pass the knife from one to the other, before ending on the enquiry: 'Perhaps you'll do the honours Mr K.?'. Here, K.'s ambiguous participation in the legal procedure against him converts Kafka's more abrupt close, in which the protagonist is murdered by two emissaries: 'Like a dog!' as K. famously declares it.¹⁷ Yet in both Kafka's novel and Harris's rendering, K.'s agency during the entire process – not what he has done to be accused, but what he has been doing since – is demonstrated as essential for, and not incidental to, his final comeuppance.

Both Harris and Vellani's interpretations of *The Trial* are alert to the costs of social stratification, whether it is in the context of a historically embedded class or caste system. They also share an acute awareness of how public protests spur political reactions that have legal consequences, which in turn reveal the wider conflation of law and politics in democratic states. K., in Harris's work, makes a single allusion to the country where he lives, describing himself as 'an island nation resilient ...' before trailing off into ellipsis. While this line provides a wry aside for a predominantly U.K.-based audience living in the post-Brexit milieu, it also hints at a range of current domestic struggles. Recent examples that might evoke Kafka's fiction include: the expansion of live facial recognition technology by law enforcement agencies in England and Wales; the proscription of Palestine Action under U.K. Government terrorism legislation; and the jail sentences handed down to citizens for their incendiary social media posts.¹⁸ It is likely not accidental that Harris employs the recurrent phrase 'tweet, tweet', repeated in condescending tones by various functionaries of the law during the play, to signal threats

¹⁷Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (Wills and Edwin Muir tr, Penguin 1986) 251.

¹⁸See 'Government Expands Police Use of Facial Recognition Vans' (*BBC News*, 13 August 2025) <www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cj4wy21dwkwo> accessed 30 August 2025; 'Palestine Action Banned after Judge Denies Temporary Block' (*BBC News*, 4 July 2025) <www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c93901n9z0qo> accessed 30 August 2025; 'Woman Jailed for Race Hate Post Released from Prison' (*BBC News*, 21 August 2025) <www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5yl7p4l11po> accessed 30 August 2025.

posed by modern technology, governance, and communications. Through this discreet and slanted revision of *The Trial*, Harris engages Kafka in the social and cultural present tense.

Why don't you go?

When conducting a critical survey of Kafka's work, it would be remiss to ignore the long history of significant film adaptations. *The Trial* (Astor Pictures, 1962), written and directed by Orson Welles (and in which Welles also plays the part of the Advocate), is the outstanding twentieth century adaptation in any medium. Shot in France, Italy, and Yugoslavia, and starring Anthony Perkins as K., it ingeniously translates Kafka's literary modernism into an apposite and entirely distinctive cinematic grammar. Welles decodes Kafka's psychological impression of time as an ocular expression of space. The picture reconfigures the temporal discontinuities in the book's structure – the abrupt shifts between passages that disorientate the reader – into an unyielding attention to proximity and scale across its *mise-en-scène*. Welles' vision manifests in the pristine monochrome photography, cavernous sets, disproportioned architecture, vertiginous camera angles, cavalier shifts in focus, and baroque approach to light and shadow: these techniques reconstitute and evoke the disordered timelines of the novel. Welles subsequently updates the events in the text to inhabit a postwar, mid-century setting that spotlights its dynamically lopsided Central and Eastern European landscapes. This vivid representation is clearly embedded in the subsequent cultural memory of *The Trial*. When writing *Innocence*, Vellani noted the difficulty of transferring the novel to India, picturing 'a grim, grimy, claustrophobic and black-and-white world' that had little in common with his country's 'sensorial vibrancy'. As he simply puts it, 'who can imagine an uncoloured India?'.¹⁹ Vellani claims he is talking about Kafka's text, but he could be easily alluding to Welles' version, especially given that Vellani adapts similar principles of lighting in his scene design, using erect and angled beams to alternately disguise and amplify his performers.

One striking sequence that exemplifies the film's influential attempts at spatial-temporal translation pitches together K. and Hilda, the scrubwoman in the law courts, as they embrace in the empty interrogation chamber. A curt series of edits plots the path of Bert the law student, one of Hilda's lovers, as he approaches. Bert is depicted first as a faraway silhouette at the door, before being shown tunnelling forward, ending close in front of the pair, his spindly legs arching between the joists of the wooden bench. These shots both visualize and exceed the sketch of K.'s interiority as it appears in Kafka's novel, where he is described in this moment as 'arguing

¹⁹Vellani, 'But is this Kafka?' (n 5).

himself [...] out of his suspicions'.²⁰ We are instead implicated in K.'s carnal guilt and voyeuristic habits. In what could be a question for the viewer, Bert stares into the camera and remarks to K.: 'Why don't you go? [...] That's what you're supposed to do'.²¹ That sense of complicity is also coded into Vellani's theatrical treatment, which lights the spectators so that 'their shadows are visible on the stage floor'.²²

The plumping of K.'s culpability with sexual overtones extends his feelings of self-reproach to the audience, inspiring other choices in Welles' adaptation. In fact, the key quality that Welles draws out from Kafka's text is the flustered eroticism of its lead. The women whom K. encounters and with whom he has various degrees of charged intimacy are played by Jeanne Moreau, Romy Schneider, and Elsa Martinelli. Admired as actors, they were also known and cast for their sex appeal in many productions across the 1960s. Welles trades on those assumptions, positioning the emotional vagaries of Perkins' queerness against their characters' seductions. The presumption of K.'s legal status is therefore entwined with his self-denying sensual urges: the law is conflated less with politics and more with sex. In fact, the film's contemporaneous political dimensions are its weakest aspect: the lines of emaciated, half-dressed men blatantly recall prisoners in the extermination camps, and the heavies who loom over them are figured as their fascist persecutors. More successful is the foregrounding of *Before the Law*, the parable of a man who is prevented entry into the law by a gatekeeper. Presented at the film's beginning, rather than in conversation with the priest (as it appears in the book's penultimate chapter), the tale is siphoned off from the rest of the narrative. Welles' unmistakably sonorous voiceover, as well as Alexandre Alexeieff and Claire Parker's modest but atmospheric pin-screen animation, introduce the underlying legal allegory in a way that permeates but does not overburden the subsequent drama and image-making.

In glaring contrast, the BBC film adaptation of *The Trial* (1993), directed by David Jones from a Harold Pinter screenplay, shows remarkable fidelity to the dialogue, scenes, and sequencing of Kafka's novel.²³ This precision spreads to the production: it was shot in Prague; events are period-specific, set in the early-twentieth century; and a vast number of characters who appear in the original book, both major and minor, are delineated and accounted for. (While Leni absorbs many different roles in Vellani's take, Miss Bürstner is the main recipient of K.'s fervent longings in this version.) To fill these roles, it contains a bountiful cast of known performers including Anthony Hopkins, Jason Robards, Juliet Stevenson, Alfred Molina, and David Thewlis, most of whom appear in one-scene cameos. Its flat, pedestrian monotony

²⁰Kafka (n 17) 66.

²¹*The Trial*, a film directed by Orson Welles (Astor Pictures 1962).

²²Vellani, 'Innocence' (n 4) 66.

²³*The Trial*, a film directed by David Jones (BBC Films 1993). It is currently available on BBC iPlayer.

is a product of its literal faithfulness to Kafka's work. Kyle MacLachlan draws out K.'s supercilious comportment, but the acting pales next to Perkins' looser, uninhibited interpretation of the character's undulating moods and fixations. It is the film's total resistance to transmitting its contemporary context that makes it such a startling comparison with the other adaptations under discussion.

Kafka's back

If literary anniversaries risk rote commemoration, Kafka's centenary year has underscored the contemporary urgency of *The Trial*, his most foundational work. The novel continues to compel artists, critics, and lawyers because Kafka treats guilt in all its political and corporeal entanglements. While post-pandemic states of exception appear embedded in many legal orders, governments have long invoked emergency legislation, instituted surveillance regimes, and normalized restrictions on mobility and association. As nations staggered out of lockdowns, bureaucratic violence reasserted itself in border policing, immigration crackdowns, and the intensified monitoring of digital communications. Against this backdrop, *The Trial* reads less as an allegory than as a recognizable account of the precarious state of modern democracies.

Vellani's *Innocence* and Harris's radio-play confront this context by refracting Kafka's fiction through their respective visions of the political landscape. Vellani's staging, embedded in India's fraught present, exposes the ease with which constitutional protections can be hollowed out by authoritarian populists. The substitution of Kafka's painter Titorelli with Teetar-batair dramatizes how caste histories, sedition law, and political vendettas intersect to manufacture culpability in the individual citizen. Harris, in turn, hints at Britain's class hierarchies and post-Brexit discontent, with the production employing discordant sound design to register both the callousness of bureaucratic language and the psychic toll of legal exposure. These adaptations demonstrate that *Kafkaesque* is not always an inert descriptor but a live aesthetic mode, which is capable of being retooled to articulate anxieties about surveillance, nationalism, and the shrinking space for political dissent. That its adaptability extends across media is telling. Radio, theatre, and cinema each mobilize distinctive formal grammars to transpose Kafka's textual strategies, whether through aural dissonance, scenic abstraction, or visual distortion. Each adaptation under review wrestles with the novel's stylistic intractability in some way: deadpan voice, abrupt transitions, and the unmooring of meaning from stable, recognizable environments. (It is perhaps ironic but not unexpected that the most loyal adaptation has the least artistic merit.) Integral formal features, more than any plot element, are what make Kafka's fiction such a generative resource for wider legal critique.

In this vein, it is imperative to look beyond *The Trial* and Kafka's prominent short stories in law and literature studies, allowing space for literary and media critics to contribute critical, cross-disciplinary insights. As Gurnham notes, Kafka's first (again, incomplete) novel *Amerika* 'seems to generate comparatively very little discussion amongst legal scholars', and while 'certainly a depiction of a marginalised legal subject [...] it has traditionally been regarded as less overtly political and allegorical'.²⁴ Harris's audio production of this text, *The Man Who Disappeared* (2024), probes migration and exile as metaphors for the exclusionary nature of the law, following the protagonist, Karl Rossmann, as he wanders haphazardly through a foreign land.²⁵ Such a text clearly resonates with present global displacements: asylum seekers are left stranded due to legal challenges, refugees are made stateless, and migrants face judicial limbo. Across his works, then, Kafka can unsettle these boundaries between legality and illegality, presence and absence, belonging and expulsion.

Taken together, these recent adaptations reveal why *The Trial* endures as a critical touchpoint in the twenty-first century. They remind audiences that the law is never only procedural but always political, that its forms of address are inseparable from social and sexual hierarchies, and that its violence is felt most viscerally at the level of the body and the voice. Reimagining Kafka at a given moment exposes the contemporaneous structures of domination. To understand these structures and the experiences felt within them, we should continue to track the global trajectory of Kafka writings, from India to Europe to the Americas, mapping how different political conditions recalibrate his fiction.²⁶ Indeed, Kafka's prophetic skirmishes with the law will continue to provoke artistic retorts for as long as legal precarity defines human existence.

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²⁴Gurnham (n 2) 144.

²⁵Ed Harris, *The Man Who Disappeared*, radio drama, adapted from Franz Kafka, directed by Sasha Yevtushenko, BBC Radio 4, first broadcast 16 June 2024.

²⁶See Karolina Watroba, *Metamorphoses: In Search of Franz Kafka* (Profile Books 2024).