

# From a Modern Absurd to a Postmodern Absurd staged in David Pledger's *K*\*

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## I. Introduction

Absurd is a musical term referring to “out of harmony with reason or propriety.” When translated into the literary discourse of absurdity, “reason or propriety” tends to be replaced by “environment or universe,” thereby spawning a batch of epithets: Kafkaesque, Beckettian, Pinteresque and Camusean, etc. The common denominator is a human being as stranger(*l'étranger*) at odds with or estranged from his/her environment, which is created by the opposition between a sublime(supernatural) being/force and a man entrapped in a helpless situation. A delicate shade of meaning in these kindred concepts is displayed depending upon the nature of the sublime force. The Kafkaesque yearns for an omniscient being(or Grace) that can lever up our fallen earth based on the Archimedean fulcrum. In the Beckettian or in the Camusean, the sublime force proves to be divine apathia, though in the latter case, an existentialist resistance

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is more pronounced; in the Pinteresque, the sublime being is immanent and embedded in our ordinary bourgeois life as the force behind us.

My notion of the modern absurd subsumes these variations of the absurd which are basically concerned with the human predicament of existence, which is oriented toward ontological concerns. Esslin's modern absurd is a good example, which foregrounds the human predicament of existence engulfed by the senselessness of "the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages"(4-5). Characters in absurd drama are thus entrapped in a gray zone between the bankruptcy of the preceding age and the uncertainty of the upcoming age. They "struggle[s] and shout[s] their[his] text"(*Waiting for Godot* 28) like Lucky, waiting for an Authority or power that is omniscient and omnipotent enough to bestow this fallen world with meanings and purposes.

The human condition portrayed in *1984* (1949) is a bit heterogenous in mainstream trends of absurdity, a few steps removed from a metaphysical quest. This novel is thrust into the realm of politically organized power, which renders an individual vulnerable and helpless. The dehumanization process under the totalitarian power is graphically depicted in this dystopian novel, which is probably a reflection upon the misuse of scientific inventions on the part of an agent with despotic powers. All kinds of scientific devices which would be apparently at least innocuous or more positively beneficial to human welfare are actually transformed into lethal weapons to control and restrain human freedom. The upshot of it is that the humans involved in this untoward and weird type of historical development are thrown into a "ridiculous and senseless" (the key ideas implied in the dictionary definition of absurd) situation. In this view, the relationship between the Authority and the modern self may not necessarily be one characterized by metaphysical concerns related to divine apathy as manifested in Lucky's monologue. I would call *1984* a

political absurdity of modernism, where man falls a victim to a political agency of totalitarian power.

Distinct from the modern absurd, the postmodern absurd does not arise from the bankruptcy of a man's world view nor a despotic power. Rather the latter is generated from a watertight system of the Enlightenment project, as trenchantly criticized by Adorno in his *Dialectic of Enlightenment*(*DE* in the following). The world view constructed by the "Enlightenment thinking"(*DE* xvi) has turned out to be paradoxically primitive and brutal, hence absurd. Individuality (*Eigentlichkeit*) and specificity (*Besondere*) evaporate in our postmodern age, "for the enlightenment, only what can be encompassed by unity has the status of an existent or an event; its ideal is the system" (*DE* 4). Thus, systematization, along with standardization tends to eliminate human elements from the process of achieving its goals. Everything becomes abstract and reified. As Adorno claims, "Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. For the enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion." (*DE* 4).

Bereft of ethical codes and creative and spontaneous imagination, the system in the contemporary age is a monster which obeys solely its own autonomous rule and mechanism. Once the idea of systematization is introduced into social life, the working of power turns abstract and depersonalized. Postmodern violence arises from this inhuman character of systematization. Individual despots or human organizations are rarely accountable for the execution of power which results in inhuman exploitation or violence. It is abstract principles that maintain the operation of the social system as mentioned in David Pledger's *K* (2002): DemoKracY, Capitalism, Consumerism, Techno-political Power, Simulacrum in media culture.<sup>1)</sup> Postmodern absurdity

thus lies in the fact that man, trapped in the web of postmodern networks of power, has turned blind to both his own identity and the objects he encounters as well as his own surroundings. This is the postmodern sublime “associated with technological structures and global corporate systems beyond the comprehension of any one mind or imagination” (Tabbi ix).

The world of *K* is replete with postmodern absurdities in Adorno’s sense. *K*’s secret and private storage of past memory is invaded and ravaged by cutting-edge devices of advanced technology in the wake of the “self-destruction of enlightenment” (*DE* xvi); man is commodified by advertising and media. Exchange value prevails and human individuality is objectified and its relationship with objects are increasingly reified.<sup>2)</sup> Aligned with this process of reduction and abstraction, man is reduced to an automaton-like being divested of creative imagination, voluntary spirit and reflective thinking, as Adorno laments: “the transcendental subject of knowledge, as the last reminder of subjectivity, is itself seemingly abolished and replaced by the operations of the automatic mechanism”(DE 23).

In other words, if modern absurd drama stages an ontological gesture of grappling with a sublime being e.g., waiting for it or being harassed by it as dramatized in Pinter’s dramatic world, postmodern absurd drama stages an

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1) In the case of consumption, for example, Galbraith contends “the accommodation of the market behaviour of the individual, as well as of social attitudes in general, to the needs of producers and the goals of the technostructure is an inherent feature of the system (my emphasis). It becomes increasingly important with the growth of the industrial system”(Baudrillard recit. 71)

2) The process of reification caused by “exchange form” may be philosophically illuminated, as Adorno states, “If the exchange form is the standard social structure, its rationality constitutes people; what they are for themselves, what they seem to be to themselves, is secondary” (“Subject and Object” 501).

epistemological blindness toward postmodern sublime objects. Starting from the premise that Pledger's *K* is a postmodern absurd drama *par excellence*, I will trace the whole gamut of absurdity from Franz Kafka's *Trial* to *K*, which apparently portray both protagonists in the grip of the absurd.

## II. The Modern Absurd : Kafka's *The Trial* (*Der Prozeß*)

In *The Trial* (1915), K is suddenly arrested and his bourgeois life crumbles under the pressure of litigation. A Kafkaesque reading reveals that the trial is less a secular one observable in an ordinary process of litigation than a metaphysical one reeking of existentialist or theological gestures. A legion of textual evidence such as the ubiquity of courtroom offices, K's pilgrimage to those courts and the lawyer's every Sunday, the existence of a supreme being that masterminds the judges behind the curtain, shows that the trial is a theological or metaphysical one.

In the opening sentence, "wurde er eines Morgens verhaftet(*Prozeß* 7)" (he was arrested one morning<sup>3</sup>), a legal term "verhaftet" is introduced. However, a moment later, the guard restrains Joseph K, saying "Sie sind gefangen(*Prozeß* 9)" (You are caught), which is an ordinary expression. According to textual study, "gefangen" was adopted in the first draft of this novella. By replacing "gefangen" with "verhaftet" in the opening sentence, Kafka wished to pronounce "a range of high-powered symbolical meanings (metaphysical,

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3) My English citation is largely based on Breon Mitchell's translation of the newly revised text with pagination added; however I have made a partial modification of some passages based on Franz Kafka *Der Proceß*. New York: Schocken Books, 1990 in order to clarify my argument.

existentialist, spiritual, mystical)” of this incident moving away from its “mundane (bio-and autobiographical)” interpretation (Kalinowski 449).

It is fair to say that K is not legally arrested as a suspect; his ordinary flow of living is nonetheless arrested. In other words, K is awakened to a striking revelation on the morning of his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday: “my life as a bourgeois (*das Man* in Heideggerian sense) was a waste of time and now I have to set out on a new journey to seek an authentic life (*Dasein* in Heideggerian sense or an authentic Christian life).” This journey of seeking redemption is however untowardly transformed into a grotesque procedure of litigation. This pattern of spiritual awakening is repeated in *The Transformation (Die Verwandlung)*, as an allegory for an existentialist situation *par excellence* for modern absurdists. What is changed in Samsa is less a bodily transfiguration than a spiritual transformation, a horrific awakening that his past was no more than a life as a bug.

This existentialist interpretation is symbolically bolstered by the description of the costume of the guard wearing a fitted jacket, like “a traveller’s outfit (*Reisenanzügen*). This is a modern version of Death in the *danse macabre*, who takes one by surprise (*mors improvisa*). Or the guard reminds the reader of Death that visited and invited Everyman to the journey of no return. At his thirtieth birthday, K probably has an epiphany that his remaining days are numbered, which forces him to set out on a journey to seek the Grace of redemption. One of the many options available is to prepare for death (*ars moriendi*) by leading a religious life which guarantees an eternal life. In this respect, what arrests him is a theological power. The procedure of trial in court is thus nothing more than his conversion experience in church.

In the course of their investigation, he naturally asks, “who’s accusing me? What authorities are in charge of the proceedings? Are you officials?” (*Trial*

14) and they nonchalantly respond, “think less about us and what’s going to happen to you, and instead think more about yourself”(14). In other words, what is at stake in this procedure is less a litigious analysis than a metaphysical reflection or religious penitence. Frau Grubach also rejoins that this arrest is not associated with such a petty crime as stealing but with “something scholarly” (etwas Gelehrtes, *Prozeß* 33), which approximates a thought crime.

The theological subtext lurking in the storyline of the litigation process surfaces crowning the climax of this novel, when K faces the prison chaplain in the cathedral. K’s preceding journey, meandering through all kinds of places scattered around the city as if they were official courtrooms, turns out to be an interior movement, i.e., his spiritual journey as shown in Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman Brown,’ *The Pilgrim’s Progress* or *Everyman*. The allegorical camouflage is cast off and K is ultimately confronted with the emissary from the theological kingdom who may be responsible for imparting the truth about the redemption he seeks. There is no congregation except for K, and K is bound to “represent the congregation”(210) alone, since the redemption is existentially individual-based in Kierkegaardian terms.

No sooner does he attempt to dodge about than the pastor calls him to stand before the divine court. K is not yet prepared to prove his innocence like *Everyman* in the medieval play; what he holds in his hand is not the Bible but “an album of city sights” (211). The pastor predicts he will be found guilty. The solitary individual before God as the prime qualification for admittance is reiterated in the embedded anecdote of ‘Before the Law’, where the doorkeeper says, “No one else could gain admittance here, because this entrance was meant solely for you. I’m going to go and shut it now (217). Little wonder that *Eintritt in das Gesetz* signifies a religious redemption to be admitted to

Paradise as an innocent soul. In sum, this novella deals with a modernist protagonist with identifiable substance and autonomy who sets out on a journey only to find himself in an absurd situation where he is eventually executed.

### III. The Postmodern Absurd

#### III.1: The Postmodern Self against the Sublime

In a postmodern society, we do not have labyrinthian courts nor Big Brother; power functions at the microphysical level, which permeates every nook and cranny of human life like air. No human agents or authorities manipulate or execute their power with specific designs and purposes, from which arises the phenomenon of the postmodern sublime. As the philosophical concept of the sublime implies, the external force affecting human perception resists representation. Under these sublime circumstances, man can no longer be the subject of his/her will and action.

In this regard we need to explore the constitution of the postmodern self. In a ground-breaking essay, "Grounding the Postmodern Self", Gubrium & Holstein contend, largely subscribing to Lyotard's insight into the postmodern condition, that there are three attributes the postmodern self stands for. Denying the subjecthood of the postmodern self, they endeavor to stress the language- and culture-bound yet floating aspect of the self. First, "the postmodern self" is "a condition of knowledge", since "in postmodernism, things become matters of narrative competence, invention, and aesthetics"(687); second, "in this condition of knowledge, the word "self" becomes a discursive horizon for presence, a "floating," but socially organized signifier, flexibly yet systematically constituting



self according to alternative vocabularies”(687); Third, “postmodern sensibilities counterpose self and nature. As a floating signifier, the self does not naturally represent any particular thing or domain of experience. If it significantly represents anything in practice, it is of cultural, not purely natural, significance” (687).

Where can we trace the conventional and modernist idea of the “self as a genuine, real attribute, as reflexive, self-conscious, rational and therefore autonomous”(Adler & Peter 31), which can be grasped and represented in objective and universal terms? According to Gubrium & Holstein, the postmodern self devoid of identifiable substance cannot act as a subject locating knowledge and truth but functions as a condition or horizon for narrative competence. In the final analysis, it is doomed to be inviolably bound by language games and cultural practices.

Against all odds, the protagonist in Pledger's *K* makes a desperate endeavor to reclaim his modernist subjecthood by rebelling against the postmodern sublime, that is, the dehumanizing onslaught of postmodernization that encompasses commodification, mediatization and technological reification. His battle requires a superhuman effort and will as well as acumen, since the enemies are incognito and abstract in the guise of capitalist principles. In this regard, The Man in Pledger's *K* is a different species from K in *The Trial* or Winston in *1984* who are modernist egos with recognizable substance and identity going through an absurd experience in theological and political terms respectively. To be more precise, Pledger's *K* is a 21st synthesis of these two types of absurdity: politics and existentialism intermingled in the era of postmodernism.

### III. 2. The Postmodern Absurd—Pledger's *K*

Pledger's *K* is an updated version of *The Trial* by Kafka. In reality, the audience can hear the same lines echoing K's words in the novella albeit in a different context.<sup>4)</sup> Also, *K* is resonant with George Orwell's *1984* fraught with all kinds of bureaucratic schemes wielding a manipulative and brainwashing power over the protagonist, "The Man" (K).<sup>5)</sup> Differently from the other two classics on absurd human condition, Pledger's *K* puts forth a new agenda, i.e., absurdity in the age of postmodernism.

The Man is "detained" at an airport checkpoint where his brain was scanned and processed by "a small device." The protagonist imagines he is detained, since he carries Kafka's *The Trial* in his bag and memory. At any rate, technological advances made in the 21st century have enabled the authority in power to invade and occupy human consciousness. The human being in the modernist vision of identity has evaporated. Not only your

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4) Pledger admits borrowing from Kafka's text: "The long monologue recited by K is literally borrowed from the explanation the protagonist of *The Trial* makes before the court. . . . Also the transformation of K into a dog is borrowed from *The Trial*. Yes, as you know I borrowed much from *The Trial*; however, I didn't dramatize it, it was a sort of text that inspired me" ("Dialogues")

5) The playwright adopts these two names of the protagonist interchangeably: The Man in the first half and K in the second half. This nominal change is charged to the full with thematic and aesthetic significance. In other words, the second half of the plot development is concerned with the psychic event transpiring in K's subconscious and conscious level of mind, which stimulates the audience to make an Expressionist interpretation. In this view, the violence done to K is not so much a physical one as a symbolic or allegorical one. This symbolic violence free of physical coercion or torture thus approximates a Foucauldian microphysics of power.

physical but also your mental movements are under severe surveillance thanks to cutting-edge inventions. As the mental torture under the guise of an "Interview" proceeds, The Man is gradually forced to surrender all his mental territory including his childhood memory to the authority in power. In the process of "re-integration," his brainwashed and empty brain is now filled with a new consciousness which worships the God of capitalism by subscribing to market principles, the commodification of human bodies, and the advertisement of multinational products across national boundaries in the wake of globalization. As Gunster reminds us, "the commodification and rationalization of labor has led to increasingly precise control over the minds and bodies of workers; human activity is subordinated to the demands of efficient production: it must adapt itself to the needs of the machine" (45).

As the plot summary indicates, The Man is a paradigmatically postmodern subject. The idea of God in *The Trial* or the presence of political authority in *1984* has evaporated; instead, whatever permeates the stage has no substance or entity. George Orwell's *1984* explores the human absurdities of those who are trapped in a web of techno-political power, which may be still subsumed and comprised in a modernist *weltanschauung*. In Pledger's *K*, we can feel the presence of power prowling on stage, wielding the controlling hand behind the scene; however, we cannot locate and define the subject of the power. It is a Foucauldian microphysics of power that infiltrates and permeates every pore of society like a force of gravity.

The quintessence of that power is systematization, which is an inevitable yet aberrant by-product of "the project of modernity", where "only what can be encompassed by unity has the status of an existent or event; its ideal is the system" (*DE* 4). In this sublime atmosphere, Pledger attempts to identify and delineate several agents of power systems working in our era. The list of

agents runs from DemoKracY, Capitalism including Consumerism and Free Market Principles, Globalization, Techno-political Power to Simulacrum in media culture. Despite their sublime character, they do not reek of metaphysical implications, whose absurdity however is generated at the level of politico-economic systems, i.e., DemoKracY and Capitalism.

These two systems are the historical products of the Enlightenment, whose “conceptual presentation of the imperative of capitalism for the elimination of barriers to the market insisted upon unification and ordering in thought as well as in politics and economics” (Phelan 600). DemoKracY is a misbegotten monster of the Enlightenment project, democracy warped by the postmodern practice of systematization. The Man in *K* preaches the importance of active participation in a democratic society, stressing “in order for Democracy to succeed, the individual must remain active within society, and not apart, disinterested and not self-interested. Democracy breaks down when the individual questions only those which threaten their self-interest” (Vision 12, *K* ).<sup>6)</sup>

Regrettably under the postmodern DemoKracY, people can hardly enjoy the legitimate right of thinking differently and doubting. They believe they do, but the truth is that they are not aware of the grim reality that they are disciplined by an abstract sublime force behind the system of surveillance. In other words, postmodern selves cannot enjoy the freedom of reflective thinking as autonomous beings but are already and always disciplined and shaped by the dominant discourse and language games. They are merely “the condition of

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6) The text cited here is based on the performance text *K* of the world premiere at Touring Exhibition Hall of Melbourne Museum directed by the playwright David Pledger on Friday, Oct. 25, 2002. The pagination will be marked by the vision number indicated in the performance text for the sake of convenience.

knowledge”, failing to gain the subjecthood of epistemology; they are degraded into a discursive horizon for presence and floating signifiers. Of course, there are no observable agents explicitly enforcing certain measures which are designed to detain postmodern selves for interrogation or to forbid them to think differently and doubt. Nonetheless, the coercion has been interiorized like a microphysics of power in their consciousness and they voluntarily put the dominant discourse into practice.

Both K in *The Trial* and *The Man* in Pledger's *K* are arrested, the first in his boarding house and the second at the checkpoint of an airport. As I mentioned earlier, K's arrest in Kafka's novella reeks of metaphysical yearnings; the charge on Pledger's *The Man* is metaphorically implied:

The Man:                Before we proceed, may I ask why I have  
                                 been detained?  
The Senior Officer: Do you have some idea of your own?  
The Man:                Because I have memorized Kafka  
The Senior Officer: Kafka is also a metaphor (Vision 5)

The metaphor of Kafka in this context does not insinuate theological tenor but political inclination. The charge for detaining The Man with Kafkaesque predilection apparently amounts to a “thought crime” such as the one committed by Winston in *1984*. As the interview proceeds, the charge gets more clearly pronounced. The Senior Officer charges The Man for “no credit card, no allegiance to any Brand,” which means “you don't engage with society” (Vision 11). The Senior Officer accuses The Man for his non-conformist attitude, which is deemed guilty and punished in this DemoKracY:

Nothing is more ridiculous than the citizen who doubts and does not

conform or contribute. Either you are a terrorist or an artist. You can only be the former as we did away with the latter years ago. (Vision 11)

Postmodern culture hates strangers, whose faces are liable to be trampled down and erased by jackboots at any moment as gruesomely depicted in *1984*. “everyman had reasons to fear the jackboot made to trample down the strange face in the dust, squeeze the strange out of the human and keep those not-yet-trampled-but-about-to-be-trampled away from the mischief of illegal frontier-crossing”(Bauman 17).<sup>7)</sup> One fears “social deviation”(DE xvi). The Senior Officer is right in paralleling artists with terrorists in the category of nonconformists. Adorno, however, goes one step further by pointing to the contemporary practice of artistic production which gives undue credit for “false clarity” and “fact”:

By tabooing any thought which sets out negatively from the facts and from the prevailing modes of thought as obscure, convoluted, and preferably foreign, that concept holds mind captive in ever deeper blindness. (DE xvii)

Ironically, in the era of late Enlightenment, the postmodern self is bereft of light and flounders in the swamp of darkness. This play dramatizes The Man’s life-and-death struggle to wriggle out of the darkness of conformism. The Senior Officer’s charge thus runs as follows:

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7) Bauman focuses on the uncertainty of postmodernism by highlighting “the capriciousness and erraticism of the marketplace” and “image-industry” as championed in media culture (24). My diagnosis of postmodernism is however quite to the contrary: marketplace and advertizement in our age tend to reduce people to standardized and tasteless automatons.

You are neurotic! You are detained because of the risk you may pose to society. You are a citizen with the potential to cause social harm and commit crimes. These crimes are a threat to capitalism, to a free press, to our basic forms of entertainment and to the future of our children. (Vision 12)

In addition to the nature of charge, the mechanism of torture sheds some light on the distinction between the modern and postmodern conditions. The power or efficacy of technological advancements is enormously tangible in the mechanism of torture. The process of interview or "re-integration" in *K* parallels with the torturing scene in *1984*. In the latter, physical torture constitutes an essential part of the brainwashing process and physical pain naturally ensued. The torture inflicted on Winston escalates from cudgeling with a truncheon, boot kicking, electrification and, finally, to the use of rats for attacking Winston. In terms of a torturing device, O'Brien's is primitive and, more significantly, it cannot invade Winston's subconsciousness in the least. Of course, deception is not easy for Winston; nonetheless, if he wishes to keep a secret, he "must also hide it from himself" and must never let it emerge into "his consciousness"(1984 294). In other words, if Winston cherishes hatred against the authority, he is capable of keeping it "locked up inside him like a ball of matter which was part of himself and yet unconnected with the rest of him, a kind of cyst"(1984 294).

In the case of *K*, this deception is impossible from the first moment. The device of torture based on a "psycho-kinetic-reflex" system is fortified and upgraded with the introduction of a biological treatment, i.e., virus. On this stage, the Officers don't need to participate in the torturing process; an algorithm has been programmed to such an effect that The Man inflicts the violence upon himself. Full credit should be given to high-technological

developments for this self-inflicting violence.

In this view, the TV Show in the second half of this play, is a unique *mise-en-scène* of what is transpiring inside K's brain which approximates a postmodern Expressionist stage *par excellence*. Thanks to "a program of neural system which can trace K's psychic state," ("Dialogues") K's inner state of mind in the course of interrogation is materialized as the TV Show on stage. The whole structure is an "emotional snuff film" as replicated on stage through the TV images which the audience can enjoy in real time. In other words, the audience can have a glimpse into K's psychic movement.

Another Kafkaesque attribute to be condemned in DemoKracY is "doubt"; The Man remonstrates:

Behind these abuses, my detention and this interview stands a great organization.<sup>8)</sup> . . . And the purpose of this organization is to detain innocent persons and start proceedings against them which are pointless and inconclusive. And this purpose has been built on the perversion of Democracy through the theft of Doubt. For without Doubt, there is no failure and therefore no learning and therefore no change. Without doubt, the practice of thought and the freedom of speech will be abolished. The ability to improve, to change, to progress will no longer exist. Without Doubt, there is no democracy. Without Democracy, there is only the Market. The Market is the enemy of the individual . . . The Marker is the Enemy of Democracy. (Vision 13)

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8) As elucidated in footnote 5, this organization does not refer to an actual group of human agents as vividly depicted existing under the dictatorship of Big Brother in *1984*. It signifies an abstract mechanism or system which functions like a panopticon in a Foucauldian sense. In this respect, The second Act of "DemoKracY" is a fantasy world unfolding inside K's brain which is externalized and materialized on stage by means of Expressionist techniques.



The Senior Officer also declares: "Privacy is a crime" (Vision 9). In democracy founded on individualism, human beings "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." If privacy is denied, the unalienable rights are good for nothing. The Senior Officer thus attempts to initiate or "re-integrate" the protagonist into a wholly new type of democracy, i.e., DemoKracY, where such Capitalist slogans as Free Market Systems, Commodification, Globalization, Corporate, Spiritualism are guiding principles. As an emissary from this dystopian system, the Senior Officer accuses "The Man": "your refusal to contribute your memories to society, is a refusal to interact. We need your Memory Access Code. We need your memory PIN" (Vision 9). As a matter of fact, they are capable of accessing the hidden recess of the hero's mind without his assistance thanks to cutting-edge technology.

The Man is, however, different from the other two submissive and blindfolded protagonists(K in *The Trial* and Winston in *1984*) ; he resists and raises his voice against the evils of dystopian postmodernism. Pledger's public enemy is doubtlessly capitalism and makes an incisive anatomization of the evils of capitalism in "The Dialogue with the artists" following a performance of *K* in Seoul at SPAF in 2005.

Yes, it's true. Human nature borders on capitalism. The capitalism we have generally known dies in the 20th century. The economic system we belong to follows not so much an individual nation as the system of global companies. Despite this obvious fact, people still cherish an illusion that each nation is capable of opting for a favorable type of capitalism. The modern capitalism was open to the redistribution of wealth thanks to the transference of the wealth from the hegemonic nations to economically underdeveloped nations. The current capitalism, however, is a hyper capitalism, where a capitalism

beyond capitalism is maintained as deprived of the opportunity of wealth redistribution. Therefore, whatever name you may call it, the clash between the democracy as system aiming at human equality and the capitalism fostering the richer the richer and the poorer the poorer is inevitable. Democracy can hardly be realized in the current reality of the corporate system. (“Dialogues”)

Conspiring with its ancillary systems like Consumerism, the Free Market and Commodification, Capitalism gradually deletes The Man. The slogan of this society is : “Mmmm Brand M! makes me feel meaningful”. The Man laments:

Capitalism died at the hands of the corporate state. The free press was bought out in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. . . We spawn commodities, Intimacy is an aberration. Children are frozen into being and encoded with the Brand of their parents and the genetic capacity to grow unique, individual characteristics with the potential to diversify consumption trends 9)

Given the current trend of consumption, K is a “flawed consumer[s]”, a “dirt” to be cleansed, a problem to be solved (Bauman 14).

Imagination and individuality championed in the Romantic age as the prime sources of creativities in the humanist project “can only be used to diversify consumptive trends, not an end itself” (Vision 12). Our society has reached “a state in which thought is being turned inescapably into a commodity and language into celebration of the commodity” (*DE* xiv) 10). In his dialogue with

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9) See Celebrity Companies, where the celebrities "register their names as brands. They marketed their life as a commodity“ (Vision 11).

10) This line echoes Lyotard’s pessimistic vision of postmodern art, “This realism of the ‘anything goes’ is in fact that of money; in the absence of aesthetic criterion, it remains possible and useful to assess the value of

the Korean audience, Pledger himself also made an incisive critique on the global phenomenon of commodification:

In a contemporary society under the globalization in progress, what defines an individual is less his character or attributes than the material like Nike, Puma or a particular football club. A specific brand tends to group people. So, what comes first in the process is that people are more interested in how their names are called. This play thus shows an individual is not recognized as an individual identity but as a brand of a company in a society of corporate systems in lieu of an individual nation. ("Dialogues")

There can be little doubt that *The Man* accuses his contemporary society, where the "lack of reality" is dominant (Lyotard 77)

Society is already overthrown. Legitimacy lies with the group, not the citizen. The human is reduced to a measurable value, a unit, a machine, a commodity. When will Society lose its addiction to this entertainment of exploration and detention. (Vision 12)

The society portrayed above reveals a Janus face, i.e., an amazingly advanced society with brutal, primitive and archaic faces. Resorting to the concept of "reification", Adorno "juxtaposes the commodity system of present-day capitalism to the archaic practice of sacrifice in order to reveal the irrationality of the former" (Rocco 76).

This commodity system gradually transforms and degrades *The Man* into a canine *K*, who barks and prowls on the stage. *The Man* initially at odds with his environment fought a bloody battle during the Interrogation session in order

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works of art according to the profits they yield" (76)

to overcome the absurdity of his age in vain; however, he is fated to become a docile body incarnated as a dog. The canine self policed, disciplined and domesticated in a Foucauldian sense has lost the power of perceiving the sublime reality in the postmodern age. In this view, K is our Everyman who has gone blind by losing his autonomous and identifiable selfhood bombarded by a legion of late capitalist principles including commodification, mediatization and globalization.

#### IV. Conclusion

The absurd refers to the human predicament of existence where man is at odds with yet incapable of coming to terms with the external force which is unfathomable and sublime beyond his power and imagination. In this view, the absurd is less a time-specific like a post World War II syndrome as explicated by Esslin than a time- and space-free, universal phenomenon over human history. However, the individual nature of the absurd varies depending on the specific time and space. As illuminated above, the modern absurd inclines toward the ontological nature of the predicament of human existence, while the postmodern absurd tends to focus on epistemological concerns of how man with subjecthood perceives him/herself and an object or environment. Kafka's *The Trial* is thus a novel of the modern absurd which traces the protagonist's spiritual journey of redemption in theological terms; Pledger's *K* is a tragic story about how the protagonist, ravaged by systematic surveillance and discipline, comes to lose his own identity and power to reason and perceive postmodern sublimations spawned by capitalism and globalization.

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## From a Modern Absurd to a Postmodern Absurd Staged in David Pledger's *K*

**Abstract**

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The absurd refers to the human predicament of existence where man is at odds with yet incapable of coming to terms with the external force which is unfathomable and sublime beyond his power and imagination. Distinct from the modern absurd, the postmodern absurd does not arise from the bankruptcy of man's world view nor a despotic power. Rather the latter is generated from a watertight system of the Enlightenment project, as trenchantly criticized by Adorno. The world view constructed by the Enlightenment thinking has turned out to be paradoxically primitive and brutal, hence absurd.

Pledger's *K* (2002) is an updated version of *The Trial* by Kafka. In reality, the audience can hear the same lines echoing in K's words in *The Trial* albeit in a different context. Also, *K* is resonant with George Orwell's *1984* fraught with all kinds of bureaucratic schemes wielding a manipulative and brainwashing power over the protagonist, "The Man"(K). Differently from the other two classics on the absurd human condition, Pledger's *K* puts forth a new agenda, i.e., absurdity in the age of postmodernism. Against all odds, the protagonist in Pledger's *K* makes a desperate endeavor to reclaim his modernist subjecthood by rebelling against the postmodern sublime, that is, the dehumanizing onslaught of postmodernization that encompasses commodification, mediatization and technological reification.

In short, the modern absurd inclines toward the ontological nature of the predicament of human existence, while the postmodern absurd tends to focus on epistemological concerns of how the human subject reflects on him/herself

and perceives an object or environment. Kafka's *The Trial* is thus a novel of the modern absurd which traces the protagonist's spiritual journey of redemption in theological terms; Pledger's *K* is, however, a tragic story about how the protagonist, ravaged by systematic surveillance and discipline, comes to lose his own identity and power to reason and perceive postmodern sublimations spawned by capitalism and globalization.

Key Words Pledger, *K*, Kafka, *Trial*, Modern Absurd, Postmodern Absurd, Adorno, Enlightenment.

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