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### POLARITIES LIMITS AND THRESHOLDS



#### THE BOUNDARIES OF BEING IN THE EYES OF FRANZ KAFKA'S METAMORPHOSIS

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# THE BOUNDARIES OF BEING IN THE EYES OF FRANZ KAFKA'S METAMORPHOSIS: A CREATIVE ADAPTATION BY ESAD'S DIGITAL ARTS AND MULTIMEDIA STUDENTS FOR FILM, ANIMATION AND GAMING.

## ABSTRACT

The presented artwork projects evoking the centenary of Franz Kafka's death (1924-2024) were developed at the end of the academic year 2023/2024 by students from the Digital Arts and Multimedia degree programme at the College of Arts and Design (ESAD, Matosinhos - Portugal) in a collaborative initiative with the University of Design, Innovation and Technology (UDIT, Madrid - Spain). The event provided experimental approaches relating to storytelling and narrative forms for cinema, animation and gaming, seeking to understand, in the eyes of Age of disposable people (Rey Chow, 2010), to what extent, in the realm of moving pictures, is it possible to evoke the tension between belief and disbelief. Meaning, the depicted real and the constructed reality, wherein sentimental returns or sentimental fabrications, merge with the boundaries of being. In this particular, Franz Kafka's Metamorphosis stresses the need to debate film's major role, and the daily uses as primal scenes, questioning mediation and immersive experience, focusing on memory's literacy today.

In brief, the presented Artwork projects aim to foster critical thinking upon the Metamorphosis' main protagonist Gregor Samsa, namely major existential concerns. After a century of history and cinema being seen as an Art form — which depicts space, time and causality — it is still the subject of constant evolution today.

## INTRODUCTION

The presented Artwork projects, evoking the centenary of Franz Kafka's death (1924-2024) were developed at the end of the academic year 2023/2024 by students from the Digital Arts and Multimedia degree programme at the College of Arts and Design (ESAD, Matosinhos - Portugal), in a collaborative initiative with the University of Design, Innovation

and Technology (UDIT, Madrid - Spain). The projects stress the need to debate film's major role, and the daily uses as primal scenes, questioning mediation and immersive experience as memory's literacy today. Over time, Kafka's seminal work, which deals with philosophical and existential questions related to identity, alienation and the absurdity of existence, has had the effect of inspiring directors, animators and screenwriters to explore these concepts within visual and narrative frameworks, given their symbolic significance.

The intersection of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* with cinema, animation and gaming presents a profound study challenge of how literature can be adapted and reimagined across different media. The metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa, the protagonist who inexplicably turns into an insect, poses a unique challenge for artists to visually depict the indescribable, a task Kafka himself deemed impossible for the illustrators of his book. Thus, in the eyes of *Age of disposable people* (Rey Chow, 2021), the above-mentioned Artwork projects seek to perceive to what extent in the realm of moving pictures is it possible to evoke the tension between belief and disbelief. Meaning, the depicted real and the constructed reality, wherein sentimental returns or sentimental fabrications, merge with the boundaries of being. In other words, to what extent do images shape the design of landscape memory? The boundaries of being as a way of self-expression in the form of film, animation and gaming, intends to unveil the fear and anxiety of losing identity values. After a century of history and cinema being seen as an Art form — which depicts space, time and causality — it is still the subject of constant evolution today.

In conclusion, the presented Artwork projects not only look forward to depict dialogues, ellipses and amnesias evoking Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, but also foster critical thinking concerning experimental approaches relating to storytelling and narrative film forms; and consequently, impacts in the sense of belonging the sympathy of things among "disposable" people and spaces.

## 2. THE BOUNDARIES OF BEING IN THE EYES OF FRANZ KAFKA'S METAMORPHOSIS

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is a profound exploration of the human condition, mirroring the concept in Rey Chow's work, where marginalized groups are alienated and excluded from mainstream society, in a globalized world, delving into the existential crises that define modern life. Kafka's novella presents, precisely, the transformation of Gregor Samsa into an insect. As a metaphor for alienation and seeking for identity amidst the limits of the absurdities of existence.

Therefore, Kafka's narrative challenges readers to consider the fluidity of identity and the societal pressures that shape our perceptions of self and others. Although the author presents a cautionary tale that highlights the risks and existential dread that can accompany drastic change, the Spanish philosopher Eugénio Trías, on the other hand, provides another framework for understanding the boundaries dimensions of the human existence within which transformation can be ethically navigated, offering a sense of hope and direction. Trías' philosophy, rooted in the concept of limit, posits that human existence is perpetually on the threshold between the known and the unknown, the finite and the infinite, the physical and the metaphysical (Trías, 1991). This liminal state is where humans encounter the ethical imperative, a call to moral autonomy within the constraints of their limited condition (Trías, 1999; 2000). Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, on the other hand,

delves into the sudden and inexplicable transformation of Gregor Samsa into an insect, symbolizing the alienation and absurdity of modern life. Both works grapple with the theme of transformation, but while Trías sees it as a boundary to be navigated, Kafka portrays it as an irreversible and isolating metamorphosis.

The “Ethics of the limit” in Eugenio Trías, suggests that true happiness and ethical living arise from recognizing and respecting the inherent limitations of human existence. It is through the practical application of reason and the embrace of symbolic rationality that one can reconcile the tensions between heteronomy and moral autonomy, finding fulfilment not in utopian ideals but in the measured reality of human limitations (Trías 2000). Kafka’s protagonist, however, is thrust into a transformation that is both physical and existential, leading to a profound disconnection from his previous human life and relationships. The metamorphosis serves as a stark commentary on the loss of identity and the dehumanizing forces at play in society. When these two perspectives intersect, a complex narrative emerges. It is one that acknowledges the transformative potential of the human condition as seen through Trías’ lens, while also recognizing the often-tragic consequences of such transformations as depicted by Kafka. The ethical imperative in Trías’ philosophy could be interpreted as a call to adapt and evolve within the confines of our reality, whereas Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* may be seen as a warning of the potential for alienation and loss of self in the face of uncontrollable change.

### 3. THE ARTWORK PROJECTS

At the turn of twenty first century, the term “viewer” is adopted once she or he is the one to take participation on the cross-modal events reading and viewing characterized by a gradual and dynamic filmic narrative process: establishing a relationship between narrator, narrative and narrate, the viewer “reconstructs” the filmic narrative through the principles of narration and the film forms applied. Originally, interpretation was fully understood as a verbal process. In the course of time, the term has shifted involving any art form that building, inferring and delivering meaning allows to comprehend *Ars intelligendi* (the art of understanding) and to interpret *Ars explicandi* (the art of explanation) filmic narrative.

The selected Artwork projects focus mainly on storytelling, both linear and nonlinear narrative, stressing self-expression through pictures, time and causality, unfolding two major cinematic dimensions - the real and constructed reality - evoking the boundaries of being: *Echoes of Solitude*; *Meet Me*; *Inhibit*; *I Have Become Nothing*.

Thus, the main goals placed to be attained, and expected conclusions to be critically observed, concerning the above-mentioned student projects, is based on the following leit-motif based on research built-criteria: to what extent it is possible to understand the concept of authenticity and illusion regarding images shaping the design of landscape memory, towards storytelling and cinema seen as an Art form?

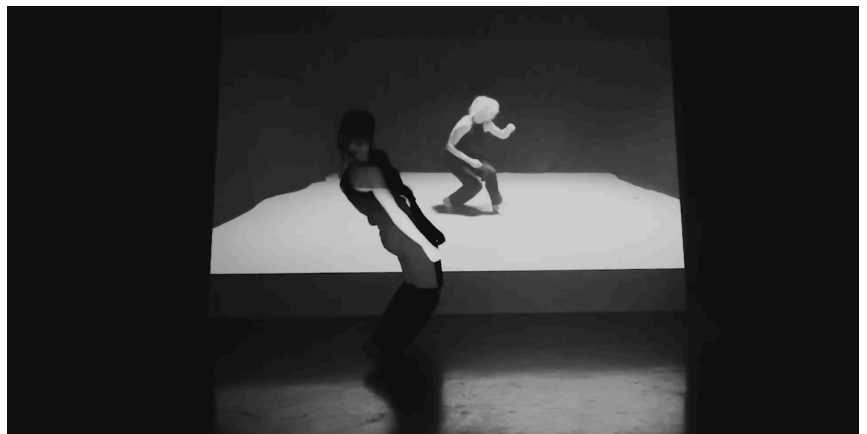
In sum, and in this particular, Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* emphasizes the importance of discussing the significant role of film, and the daily uses as primal scenes questioning mediation and immersive experience focusing on memory’s literacy today. The presented Artwork projects focus on viewers perception and ability to decode narrative discourse, comprehending visual representation towards “reading”, “viewing” and “interpreting” process.



Figure 1/2/3.  
Echoes of Solitude (2024).  
Screenshots from the short film  
by André Peneda, Christoph Wanderer,  
Diogo Cervantes, Pedro Carvalho.



Figure 4/5/6.  
Meet Me (2024).  
Screenshots from a video art  
from Zofia Bochenska.



Evoking Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, a mind map was developed along with students at the launch of the pre-production proposal project. In order to deliver a script to be produced and directed in short-term, a collaborative in-class work was performed, based on the following dichotomous key concepts observed, as follows: Absurdity; Alienation; Absence of conscience; Transformation; Identity; Family relationships; Oppression and Loneliness. On the one hand, in the eyes of *Echoes of Solitude*, a short-fiction narrative produced and directed by students André Peneda, Christoph Wanderer, Diogo Cervantes and Pedro Carvalho, evokes Kafka's *Metamorphosis* main protagonist Gregor Samsa's anxieties. It means, by approaching his greatest fears to reach out for help, settling visually speaking with giving the character white eyes, *Echoes of Solitude* intends to address both metaphorically and visually storytelling, in particular how the character is unable to see a way out of the predicament he finds himself in: loneliness, transformation, isolation. The sound design aimed to create sensory experience for the viewer, stressing the above-mentioned predicament the main character finds himself in, allowing to become more immersed in a way that is relevant to experience the narrative memory attachment.

On the other hand, the Artwork project entitled *Meet Me*, produced and directed by student Zofia Bochenska, evokes Kafka's *Metamorphosis* sentimental fabulations in the eyes of exploring video art narrative boundaries, centering viewer's experience on Kafka's *Metamorphosis* main protagonist Gregor Samsa's anxieties. This creates a sensorial experience, merging down image and choreographic movements aligned with an inner-state of mind based on the following inner-thoughts: Alienation; Absence of conscience; Transformation. *Meet Me* questions the boundaries between the real and the constructed reality. That takes place addressing an elliptical narrative structure, wherein sentimental

Figure 7/8.  
*Meet Me* (2024).  
 Screenshots from a video art  
 from Zofia Bochenska.

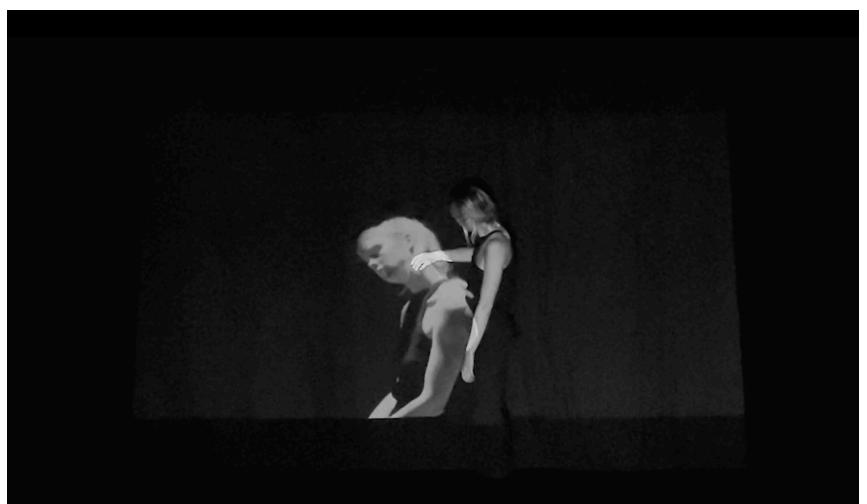




Figure 09/10/11.  
Inhibit / Repressão (2024).  
Screenshots from  
the short animated film  
by Érica Amorim, Guilherme Gomes,  
Mara Silva.



returns or sentimental fabulations are conveyed through an immersive filmic experience, memory and identity. In brief, *Echoes of Solitude* and *Meet Me* focus the viewer's attention on "reading", "viewing", and "interpreting", based on film-viewing experience.

On the counterpart, the art of animation, with its ability to transcend the limits of realism, offers a unique platform for exploring complex and abstract themes, most of which are bound up with philosophical and existential issues. In the animated short film *Inhibit*, produced and directed by students Érica Amorim, Guilherme Gomes, Mara Silva, the theme is centred on the concept of alienation and repression, represented by a character who clamps his mouth shut as a sign of his inability to live freely for fear of not being accepted by others. According to the students' perspective, the idealisation of repression was portrayed as a psychological concept that refers to the suppression of thoughts, feelings or desires that are considered unacceptable or threatening. In the social context, repression can manifest itself as the suppression of freedom of expression and the imposition of silence. In *Inhibit*, the act of stapling one's own mouth results in a visceral image that symbolises this suppression, representing the impossibility of speaking or expressing oneself freely. The artwork project focused its visual and narrative exploration on metaphors, shapes and movements that intensified the feeling of suffocation, silencing and alienation.

Expanding the capabilities of animation, the project *I Have Become Nothing* is presented as a short psychological horror game, conceived by students Michaela Gripenstam, Lourenço Silva, Normando Rabelo, Raquel Gouveia, which evokes Kafka's *Metamorphosis* through an immersive, non-linear narrative. This 2D game allows players to become Leon Kaufmann, the game's protagonist, who sets off on a journey, facing harsh realities of physical

Figure 12/13.  
*I Became Nothing* (2024).  
 Screenshots from the video game  
 by Michaela Gripenstam,  
 Lourenço Silva, Normando Rabelo,  
 Raquel Gouveia.

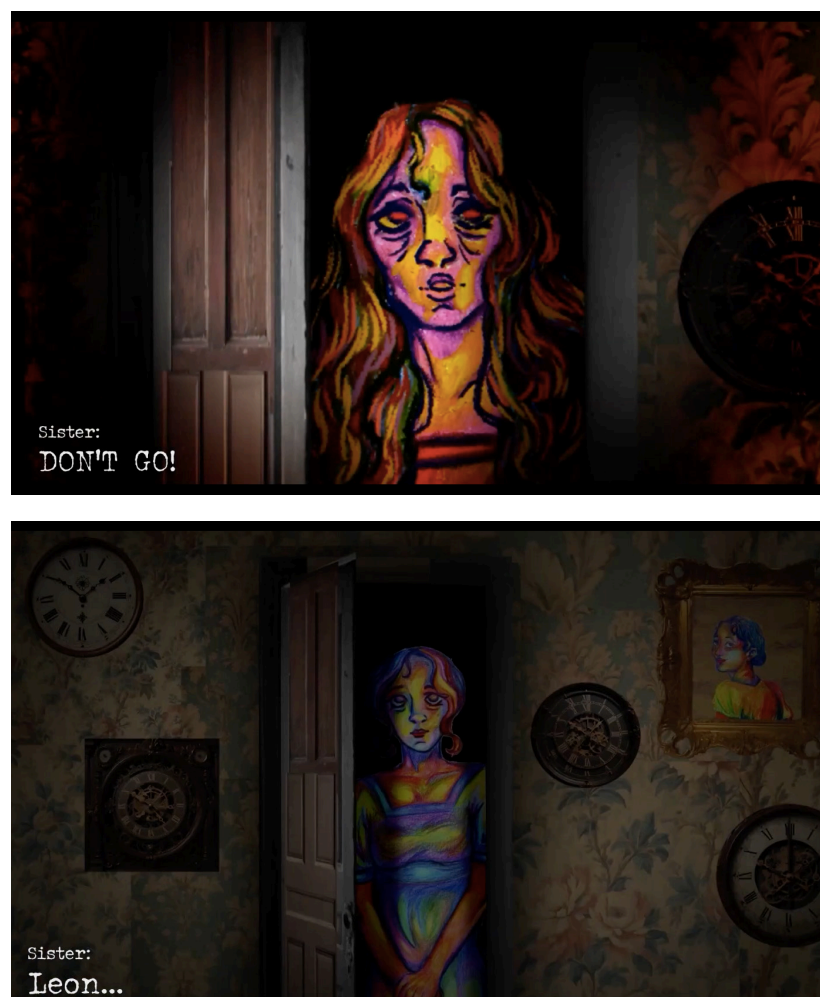




Figure 14/15/16.  
I Became Nothing (2024).  
Screenshots from the video game  
by Michaela Gripenstam,  
Lourenço Silva, Normando Rabelo,  
Raquel Gouveia.



Figure 17/18.  
 I Became Nothing (2024).  
 Screenshots from the video game  
 by Michaela Gripenstam,  
 Lourenço Silva, Normando Rabelo,  
 Raquel Gouveia.



and existential transformation, experiencing his reactions to his new and unwanted form of existence. The game consists of 3 chapters, each with unique controls, objectives and art styles that emphasise the character's transformation, as well as his relationships with the different members of his family. In *I Have Become Nothing* the non-linear narrative enables players to explore the story at their own pace, while letting them explore different aspects of the story and make choices that influence the course of events. In addition, the combination of different artistic styles and mechanics enriches the experience, making it more immersive and emotionally impactful. This approach enhances the experience of psychological horror, by immersing players in a disconnected and disturbing narrative, allowing them to express themselves and experiment being in the protagonist's shoes.

These last two projects allow us to realise that the intersection between animation and Kafka's *Metamorphosis* proved to be fertile ground for artistic and academic exploration, decoding narrative discourse and understanding visual representation in the sense of the process of reading, visualising and interpreting. In *Inhibit*, it was possible to bring complex metaphors to life through a personal perspective on repression and alienation. As for *I have become Nothing*, interactivity provided a deeper connection between the player and the narrative, allowing for a more personal and introspective exploration of the themes addressed by Kafka. This crossover not only enriched the students' understanding of Kafka's work, but also allowed them to explore storytelling approaches and test the limits of animation and game design as an expressive and meaningful art form, capable of creating a rich and emotionally resonant experience.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In brief, the presented Artwork projects evoking the centenary of Franz Kafka's death (1924-2024) intend to shed light on the need of debating filmic object's post-mediation and its immersive experience today. It becomes evident that pictorial turn is understood as an age of simulation (W. J. T. Mitchell, 1992). The moving image, through its dynamic interlacing of space, time, and causality, has not only transformed the landscape of memory but also redefined the contours of identity and self-expression. As cinema continues to evolve as an art form, it persistently challenges and reshapes our perceptions of existence and authenticity.

In the margins of the age of global visibility, the presented Artwork projects seek to perceive to what extent in the realm of visual representation is it possible to observe the frontiers of believing. By its turn, the depicted real and the constructed reality are influenced by Kafka's existential inquiries, meeting sentimental returns or sentimental fabrications. These lead to the boundaries of being, memory and identity. His exploration of self-expression, alienation, and the absurdity of existence resonates deeply within the cinematic realm, inspiring a myriad of interpretations and adaptations. These artistic endeavours, which often draw upon Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, serve not only as a reflection of the human condition but also as a catalyst for critical discourse on narrative experimentation and the role of memory and identity in a rapidly changing world. Furthermore, the projects mentioned, such as *Echoes of Solitude* and *Meet Me*, underscore the significance of the viewer's engagement with the filmic text. The act of 'reading,' 'viewing,' and 'interpreting' becomes a participatory experience, where the audience is invited to navigate the complexities of narrative forms and the nuances of visual language. This engagement is particularly poignant in *Inhibit*, where the animation medium allows for a vivid and personal manifestation of metaphorical concepts. As for *I have become Nothing* interactivity provided a deeper connection between the player and the narrative, facilitating a more personal and introspective exploration of themes addressed by Kafka. Such cross-media adaptations not only enhance comprehension of Kafka's oeuvre but also push the boundaries of how stories can be told and experienced in the digital age. In the eyes of *Age of disposable people* (Chow, 2021), this dialogue is crucial in understanding the impact of visual media on our collective and individual identities.

In conclusion, the intersection of film, animation, and gaming with philosophical and existential themes presents a rich opportunity for exploration. It is a domain where the sentimental fabrications of being are continuously woven and unwoven, revealing the fears, anxieties, and aspirations of a society in flux. As we navigate this ever-evolving landscape, the questions posed by Kafka and the challenges presented by the medium of moving pictures remain as pertinent as ever, urging us to trigger critical thinking on the essence of our being and the realities we construct and seek to comprehend.

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