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Zoom link: TBD

Approaching Kafka

Philosophy 161: Topics in Aesthetic Theory
UCLA Summer 2026: Session A (June 22-Jul 31)
M/W 10:45AM-12:50PM

Hopeless individuals crumbling under the might of a faceless, industrialized bureaucracy. All-powerful judges issuing sentences of indefinite punishment to the dumbfounded, broken accused. The impossibility of intimacy. These are the marks of Kafka's world. As our own world becomes decidedly more like Kafka's—more *Kafkaesque*—with each passing day, the imperative to read his work asserts itself with renewed force. Just *how* to approach and read Kafka adequately, however, remains an open question. Here is our problem: On the one hand, we need to read Kafka. On the other hand, we don't know how. For philosophers, this challenge is posed in a unique way, since Kafka's works both naturally provoke *and* resist philosophical interpretation. This precise dilemma marks the point of departure for this course. In it, we will explore the question of philosophical interpretation of literature by reading Kafka's works alongside interpretive essays by philosophers and critics such as Adorno, Arendt, Benjamin, Butler, Hamacher, and Ronell.

Readings:

PDFs of all readings will be provided on the course website. All Kafka texts will be taken from *Kafka's Selected Stories* (Norton; 2007), edited and beautifully translated by Stanley Corngold. I highly suggest—but do not require—that you purchase this book for yourselves [here](#).

Each week, on Monday, we will focus on primary texts from Kafka. On Wednesday, we will discuss the accompanying secondary literature.

Week 1:

- Kafka - *The Trial* (Chapter 1, "Arrest")
- Hannah Arendt "Franz Kafka, Appreciated Anew"

Week 2:

- Kafka - "The Test"
- Werner Hamacher - "The Uncalled" (selections)

Week 3:

- Kafka - "The Judgment"

- Walter Benjamin - “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death” (selections)

Week 4:

- Kafka - “A Country Doctor”
- Theodor Adorno - “Notes on Kafka” (selections)

Week 5:

- Kafka - “Letter to the Father” (selections)
- Avital Ronell - “The Good Loser” (Chapter 4 in *Loser Sons*; selections)

Week 6:

- Kafka - “Knock at the Courtyard Gate;” “Before the Law”
- Judith Butler - “Indefinite Detention”

Assignments and Course Requirements:

3 in-class “close reading” exercises: 15% each/45% total

- We will regularly practice close reading throughout the course. These exercises are designed to give you experience in laboring carefully upon a text and extracting philosophically and critically relevant questions from it.
- Details TBD. Exercises will be held in class, probably on pre-scheduled Wednesdays.

Final paper: 40%

- 5-6 pages; double spaced; 12pt. font; 1-inch margins
- Papers will be based on a prompt, circulated in advance.

Course participation: 15%

- This course is to be an ongoing conversation. Your participation in that conversation is necessary for the success of the course. Please keep your camera on during our discussions.

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism is a serious offense and will be dealt with in accordance with university policy. For information about academic integrity at UCLA, see the Dean of Students note on [“Forms of Academic Dishonesty.”](#) If you are unsure about what constitutes plagiarism or how to properly cite sources, please ask me before submitting your work.

Academic Accommodations

Students who require disability-based academic accommodations should contact the Center for Accessible Education (CAE) as soon as possible by phone (310-825-1501), email (caeintake@saonet.ucla.edu), or in person (A255 Murphy Hall).

Campus Resources

• **UCLA Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS):** Located at John Wooden Center West, 221 Westwood Plaza. Reachable by phone at 310-825-0768 or by email at

info@caps.ucla.edu.

• **Undergraduate Writing Center:** Located at A61 Kaplan Hall. Reachable by phone at 310-206-1320 or by email at wcenter@g.ucla.edu.

Note: this syllabus is subject to revisions at the instructor's discretion.