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C O L O G N E . L E I P Z I G

ENIGMA REBUS

PROLEGOMENA TO AN ARCHÆOLOGY OF
ALGORITHMIC ARTEFACTS

1. The Consolation of the House Father

“At first glance it looks like a flat star-shaped spool for thread, and indeed it does seem to have thread wound upon it; to be sure, they are only old, broken-off bits of thread, knotted and tangled together, of the most varied sorts and colours. But it is not only a spool, for a small wooden crossbar sticks out of the middle of the star, and another small rod is joined to that at a right angle. By means of this latter rod on one side and one of the points of the star on the other, the whole thing can stand upright as if on two legs.”¹

With these words, the Czech writer Franz Kafka (1883–1924) describes a mysterious being named Odradek in his short story “The House Father’s Concern”, written around 1917 and first published in 1919. The strange apparatus moves around autonomously, talks like a child, and occasionally laughs dryly. If this were a report about a robot that operates on a terrain known to it and says “Odradek”, “No fixed abode” and “Haha” if spoken to, the text would not be very surprising. A similar anthropoid, “Elektro”, was built twenty years later by the Westinghouse Electric

¹ Franz Kafka, The Cares of a Family Man, in: *The Complete Stories* (New York, 1971), p. 428. The story “Die Sorge des Hausvaters” was first published in: *Selbstwehr. Unabhängige jüdische Wochenschrift* vol. 13, 51/52 (19 December 1919, Chanukkah Issue). “The House Father’s Concern” is a more accurate translation of the title, because the German “Sorge” in its intransitive form rather means to worry and not to care, and “Hausvater” does not necessarily imply that the person is married. He could well be a kind of warden.