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The Trial

Temenuga Trifonova (https://www.sensesofcinema.com/author/temenuga-trifonova/) February 2006

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Le Procès/*The Trial*/*Il Processo*/*Der Prozess* (1962 France/Italy/West Germany/Yugoslavia 118 mins)

Source: Level Four Films **Prod Co:** Paris-Europa Productions/Hisa-Films/FI-C-IT **Prod:** Michael Salkind, Alexander Salkind **Dir:** Orson Welles **Scr:** Orson Welles, from the novel by Franz Kafka **Phot:** Edmond Richard **Ed:** Yvonne Martin, Fritz Mueller **Art Dir:** Jean Mandaroux **Mus:** Jean Ledrut
Anim Prologue: Alexandre Alexeieff, Claire Parker

Cast: Anthony Perkins, Orson Welles, Jeanne Moreau, Romy Schneider, Elsa Martinelli, Madeleine Robinson, Suzanne Flon, Akim Tamiroff, Max Haufler, Max Buchsbaum, Arnoldo Foà, Michel Lonsdale

Mrs: Grumbach: *I get the feeling of something abstract.*

K.: *I'd say it's so abstract I can't even consider that it applies to me.*

– from Welles' *The Trial*

The Trial is stylistically consistent with, if not even more visually extravagant than, Orson Welles' previous films. Welles employs a number of filmic devices and themes that have come to be seen as his "trademark": elaborate frame compositions (*mise-en-abyme* effects, dissonant angles and edges), depth of field photography, low-angle shooting and the use of constructed ceilings visible in the frame, expressionistic lighting (shadowing/silhouetting effects), attention to sound editing ("cuts" foregrounding the collage of classical and modern music), visual grandiloquence bordering on the decadent (baroque buildings, archways, columns, gigantic statues shrouded in billowing stone robes, houses in ruins, deserted dark streets), the telescoping of time through a reconstructive narrative, long takes, a preference for long and medium shots encouraging emotional and moral detachment in the viewer, temporal and spatial dislocation, a fascination with criminality and with tragic heroes, and a misogynistic portrayal of women (female characters are represented as lewd, revengeful or physically deformed).

One of the challenges Welles faced in making this film was whether to translate the idiosyncratic temporality of Kafka's parable, which unfolds in the present eternal, a modally weak tense constitutive of allegory, into the dramatic conventions of narrative film, which unfolds according to an opposing, dynamic, modally strong type of temporality. Welles decided to keep the novel's temporality: the film takes place in an abstract time with no inflections in the narrative and although it seems to follow the familiar quest structure, we don't get the feeling that K. is gradually discovering new facts about his case or that his encounters with other characters are meaningful to him, or to the plot, in any way. This is, of course, consistent with Welles' retrospective approach to narrative. Many of his films are structured like Greek tragedy, the role of the Greek chorus played by various narrative devices that, in the opening scene, provide a literal or poetic synopsis of the story to follow: the newsreel in *Citizen Kane* (1941), the quasi-documentary in *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), the witches' convocation in *Macbeth* (1948), the funeral procession in *Othello* (1952), the parable of the Law in *The Trial*.

The Trial opens with Alexandre Alexeieff and Claire Parker's animated pin-screen illustration of the parable of the Law, narrated in voiceover by Orson Welles, who plays K.'s Advocate and dubs the voices of all the authority figures in the film. The parable tells the story of a man who seeks admittance to the Law, but is denied access by the Guard, who informs the man that an entrance is, in principle, possible but that he must wait. The man waits. Years go by. He grows old and feeble. Feeling that his end is drawing near, the man asks the Guard why no-one else has come seeking entrance to the Law in all these years. The Guard replies that the door was meant only for the man and that now he is going to close it. By opening with this parable, the film positions the audience in a privileged moral position from which to judge the characters' actions as they are inevitably refracted through, and rendered meaningful as, illustrations of the parable. The absurdity of Kafka's tale is somewhat mediated by the visual explanation given in advance (Welles returns to this use of "visual aids" at the end of the film when the Advocate repeats the parable as a slide show).

The film follows K., a petty bureaucrat in a factory-like office with hundreds of other anonymous clerks, as he attempts to find out the reason for his arrest (which remains purely abstract as K. is left free to wander and look for those who supposedly issued the order for his arrest) and to argue his innocence before the Court of Law. The narrative is spatially rather than temporally organised: it is unclear how much time passes between the morning K. is informed of his arrest and the morning he is executed in a crater on the outskirts of town. What strings together the disparate episodes in which K. meets other characters, who either obstruct

his search for justice or offer their help, is Welles' vision of the different settings as interconnected through a series of secret dark passages, staircases, entrances and exits that collapse the distinction between public and private space. The events taking place at the Cathedral, the Office, the Court House, the court painter's studio, and K.'s apartment building, are all mutually implicated and the responsibility for what happens to K. and to the other accused is evenly distributed, and thus concealed, confirming K.'s paranoia about a universal conspiracy. In a 1965 interview, Welles explained that his original design was to have the sets gradually disappear, the number of realistic elements gradually diminish, until only open space remained, as though everything had dissolved away ()(1). Inevitably, he ran out of money and ended up shooting the outdoor scenes in the streets of Zagreb and the office scenes in the derelict Gare d'Orsay in Paris (the open space he envisioned is replaced by the blank screen remaining after the slide projection of the parable of the Law in the final sequence of the film).

Welles' baroque set design, with its patent spatio-temporal distortions, enhances the impression that the different settings function as symbolic, nightmarish manifestations of K.'s inner turmoil and thus dissipate the Kafkaesque sense of the absurd, which straddles the line between the real and the unreal, the logical and the illogical, and is never defined by any one of them. The film, then, is more easily reducible to an allegory than the novel.

While the novel works on two levels simultaneously – as a disclosure of the interpellation through which ISA (ideological state apparatuses) suture subjects into obedience under the pretense that they choose to be subjugated out of their own free will, and as a commentary on the absurdity of the human condition – the film sinks into a symbolic quagmire as it tries to update Kafka's parable by including references to the Holocaust. The film starts out as a private political nightmare, then "raises the stakes" by universalising K.'s case into that of numerous deportees condemned to death (we see them standing still, half-undressed, beside a shrouded monument of some public Ideal, perhaps Freedom), and throws in some universal existential angst for good measure (summed up in the "distinction" between "definite acquittal," "ostensible acquittal" and "deferment of punishment").

K.'s character is a confusing mixture of self-contradictions. Even as he pompously declares himself the spokesperson and defender of the accused, he continues to act and talk as a self-righteous bureaucrat: he boasts to his landlady that his own clients often have to wait for a week to get admittance to his office, and he refuses to speak to his uncle and niece during work hours for fear that this might jeopardise his promotion. K.'s bombastic rebelliousness, cool indifference to his own fate, and disinterest in the women who pursue him and, on the other hand, his petty dreams of rising up the office hierarchy, make the final image in the film particularly troubling. In the novel, K., having rejected both religion (the Priest) and the "dirty Scriptures" (the Law, whose obscenity is exposed by the pornographic pictures K. finds in an old law book), is dragged to a crater where his executioners drive a knife through his heart. His final words are "Like a dog"; his shame outlives him as he refuses the chance to kill himself for he is unable to take even that responsibility. Welles, however, could not end the film with an image of a Jew succumbing to his death meekly; besides, that kind of ending is foreign to his own temperament as a filmmaker fascinated with tragic characters who take a perverse pleasure in their own self-destruction, regarding it as the ultimate act of self-affirmation. Welles has K. taunt his executioners and laugh triumphantly in their faces. The film's last image is supposed to be that of a man undefeated by the two main enemies of human freedom, the Law and the Church, and yet we cannot quite shake off the image of a self-righteous, obsequious bureaucrat preoccupied with his status in the office, a petty official who pontificates well, proudly dismisses his powerful Advocate, and vainly appoints himself the defender of human dignity and of Meaning, Reason and Order. Welles has said himself that he is a pessimist but a pessimist allergic to despair, so it is no surprise that he transforms Kafka's nameless and helpless nobody into a characteristically resourceful, ambitious and active American. The absurdity

of Kafka's tale, and for that matter the very notion of the absurd in European literature/drama, remains impalatable to Welles, who is known to have accused writers like Eugene Ionesco of political apathy and antihumanism.

Still, Welles' representation of K. is by no means consistent, perhaps because of the director's own difficulty in distinguishing between guilt and responsibility: he treats the character sympathetically but he also mocks K.'s innocence by exposing his responsibility precisely in those circumstances where K. acts in accordance with moral principles (K. is responsible for Miss Bruster's eviction and for the flogging of the policemen). On the other hand, however, K.'s self-righteousness and resourcefulness acquire Nietzschean overtones in the scene in which he dismisses the Advocate, who responds to his dismissal by observing that there is something strangely attractive about a man conscious of being accused. Although he does not elaborate, the ensuing scene in which K. refuses to wait patiently like Block, the faithful client, makes it clear that what makes K. attractive is his pride (although here too the lines between pride, dignity and vanity—as those between responsibility and guilt – get blurry). The tension between the liberal and Christian tradition with which Welles officially identifies (all men are equal, all are accused), the Nietzschean, exceptionalist conception of the Übermensch who stands above the law, and the existentialist conception of man's nobility as a product of the absurd, remains unresolved.

The film raises but does not seriously explore the most radical implication of its premise, that the very notions of guilt, sin and responsibility are not imposed on man from without; rather, as Sartre has argued, it is only through man that these notions come to mean something to begin with. The film suggests this on three occasions: 1) when the Advocate informs K. that according to one interpretation of the parable man came to the Law out of his own free will (man is responsible for creating the idea of the Law and the possibility of not getting admittance to the Law, a kind of pre-ontological responsibility that Sartre identifies as nothing other than our absolute freedom, the human origin of all values and of their critique); 2) when some of the accused mistake K. for a judge (implying the collapse of the man-made distinction between the judge and the judged, the executioner and the condemned); and 3) when K.'s two executioners appear, in a powerful image, from behind his body on the steps of the Cathedral (a visual rendering of the idea that social and moral norms are projections of one's own conscience). Thus, when K.'s landlady remarks that there is something abstract about K.'s case, we should understand "abstract" to refer not only to the unknown cause for K.'s arrest, but more generally to the idea that the Law is an abstraction created by man himself. As the parable demonstrates, the entrance to the Law is not closed. It is man who prevents himself from entering by creating the notion of guilt, which posits, retrospectively, the necessity – in fact, the inevitability – of closing the door.

To be fair to Welles, although his film seems to betray the absurd by appending an upbeat humanist ending to Kafka's dreary tale, one should further consider the nature of the absurd. In his essay on Kafka, Camus elaborates on the connection between the condemned man's pride and the absurd ()(2). He argues that Kafka's world is not completely devoid of hope, for Kafka – like Welles – often collapses absurdity into nobility: man's nobility depends on the absurd, because it is precisely in struggling in vain (like Sisyphus), in being fully conscious – and scornful – of the futility of everything, that man is able to surmount his fate.

Endnotes

1. ()Charles Higham, *The Films of Orson Welles*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1970, p. 159.
2. ()Albert Camus, "Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka", *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien, Vintage Books, New York, 1955, pp. 92-102.

Orson Welles (https://www.sensesofcinema.com/tag/orson-welles/)

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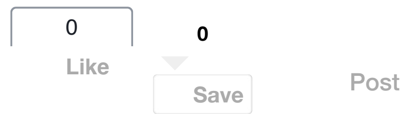

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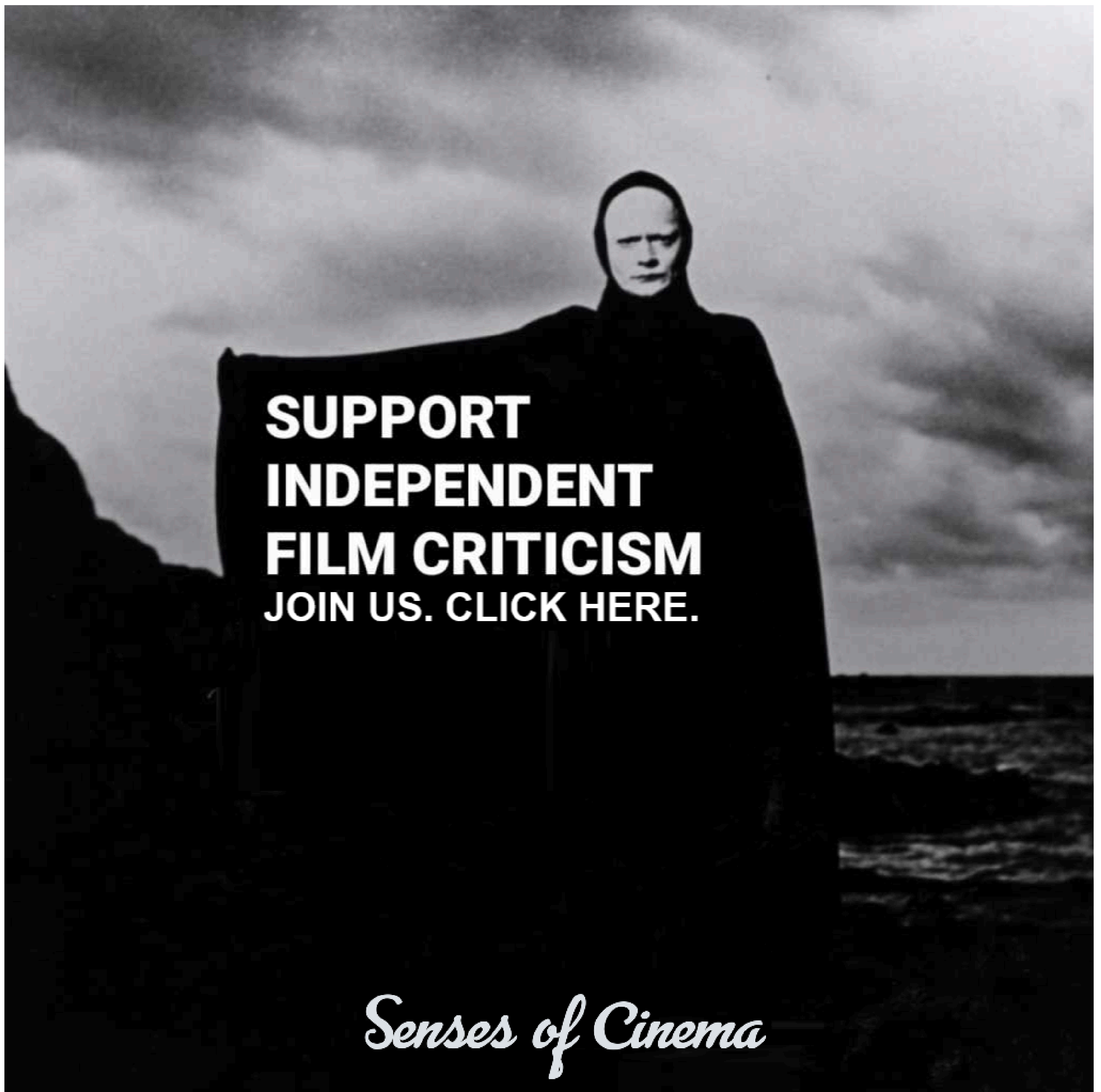

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