

The Trial / le Proces (1962) Orson Welles (2010 restoration)

(1962 France/Italy/West Germany/Yugoslavia 118 mins)

P Michell, 2021

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.*

“Say what you like, but THE TRIAL is the best film I ever made.” — Orson Welles (Until Falstaff / Chimes at Midnight).

The film was reacted to more positively in France, where it won the "Best Film" award of the [French Syndicate of Cinema Critics](#) in 1964. ^[citation needed]

[Charles Higham](#)'s 1970 biography of Welles dismissed the film as "an agonizing experience ... a dead thing, like some tablet found among the dust of forgotten men."

Stature

The Trial has grown in reputation over the years, and some critics, including [Roger Ebert](#), have called it a masterpiece. It is often praised for its [scenic design](#) and [cinematography](#), the latter of which includes disorienting camera angles and unconventional use of [focus](#)

IFC (New York) screening 2018:

For years, no one could even consider this bold statement due to the poor, dupey, grainey, barely legible prints and videos that are for sale. Now, with a new stunning video mastering off of the original 35mm negative, THE TRIAL glows with the cinematic brilliance Orson Welles originally intended.

Based on the great novel by Franz Kafka, Joseph K, a young bank clerk, is awakened one morning by a police inspector and two detectives. They have come to arrest him. Although he has committed no crime and has no idea of the charges, he finds himself being discussed and scorned by his neighbours, all of whom seem to know the details of his case. K is led through a labyrinth of corridors and taken before an examining magistrate, but he still cannot find out why he is under suspicion. His uncle, who somehow knows about his forthcoming trial, takes him to a bedridden advocate, Hastler, who agrees to act as his defense attorney. While the advocate rambles on about legal problems, K is seduced by Leni, the advocate's nurse and

mistress, who is irresistibly drawn to condemned men. After dismissing the advocate because of his delay in getting on with the case, K meets a priest who tells him an allegorical tale of a man who waited all his life at the door of The Law but died without gaining admittance. Then, early one morning, K is accosted by two executioners who lead him to a quarry at the edge of town. They want K to take his own life but he refuses. When he defiantly maintains his innocence and laughs hysterically at his tormentors, they toss two sticks of dynamite into the pit. Following an explosion, a mushroom shaped cloud rises from the quarry.

Welles brilliantly captures the novel in this powerfully surreal masterpiece. Fans can finally see THE TRIAL as Welles wanted it to be seen.

The Parable

"The Trial" is based on the Franz Kafka novel of the same name. Welles also includes a shorter Kafka parable, "Before the Law," in the pinscreen opening to the movie.

Originally the slides at the beginning of the film of 'the story' was a mini-film by Alexander Alexieff. Each screen consists of 1.4 million pins!

The "pin-screen," also called the "pin-board," used in the opening and closing sequences was invented by [Alexander Alexeieff](#) in the early 1930's. It is a board with pins stuck in it at regular intervals. The pins can be raised or lowered to form an image, which can then be lit and photographed. By manipulating the pins and photographing them one frame at a time, the device can be used for animation. Alexeieff and [Claire Parker](#) made at least two short animated films using the pin-screen, [Une nuit sur le mont chauve](#) (1938) and [Le nez](#) (1963).

Le Nez (1963) based on Gogol story and is on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFmCLVow0ts>

The Music

Albinoni's (hauntingly beautiful) Adagio in G is used extensively and with great effect. The composer works were known to Bach, though much lost during WWII Dresden fire. The famous *Adagio in G minor*, the subject of many modern recordings, is thought by some to be a [musical hoax](#) composed by [Remo Giazotto](#). However, a discovery by musicologist Muska Mangano, Giazotto's last assistant before his death, has cast some doubt on that belief. Among Giazotto's papers, Mangano discovered a modern but independent manuscript transcription of the [figured bass](#) portion, and six fragmentary bars of the first violin, "bearing in the top right-hand corner a stamp stating unequivocally the [Dresden](#) provenance of the original from which it was taken". This provides support for Giazotto's account that he did base his composition on an earlier source.

Music was first recorded in late 1950s. 'The Trial' and 'Sundays and Cybele (1962) helped popularise the music.

Here's a nice version:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsCEEV7HPUw>

Creative Personnel:

Orson Welles – Director, co-scriptwriter, *The Advocate*, editor, etc. (127 credits)

Enfant terrible of Hollywood. Director, actor, editor, scriptwriter. Larger than life both creatively and physically! Mega-Famous for two works – War of the Worlds radio broadcast of 1938, which scared the pants of America! Citizen Kane (1941) has been for decades considered a landmark film. After Kane Welles made arguably the ‘greater’ film - The Magnificent Ambersons (1942), however the film was edited without his input and about the half the original footage is lost.

Welles’ distinct voice-acting has been utilised many times including for Xerox advertisements.

The Stranger (1946) was the only film made by Welles to have been a *bona fide* box office success upon its release. Its cost was \$1.034 million; 15 months after its release it had grossed \$3.216 million.^[112] Within weeks of the completion of the film, International Pictures backed out of its promised four-picture deal with Welles. No reason was given, but the impression was left that *The Stranger* would not make money.^{[22]:381}

Other films he directed include Lady from Shanghai (1947), Macbeth (1948), Othello (1951), Touch of Evil (1958) [very good], Falstaff / Chimes at Midnight (1965, Immortal Story (1968) for French TV.

Welles is also famous for as many unfinished projects including Moby Dick, Don Quixote, Othello, The Deep etc. Though he acted in interesting films including Lady From Shaghai,

His distinctive directorial style featured layered and [nonlinear narrative](#) forms, uses of [lighting](#) such as [chiaroscuro](#), unusual camera angles, sound techniques borrowed from radio, [deep focus](#) shots and [long takes](#). He has been praised as "the ultimate [auteur](#)".^{[7]:6}

Orson Welles reportedly dubbed 11 characters including few lines of Anthony Perkins dialog. Perkins later said he could never figure out which lines they were.

Recently released ‘Mank’ (2020) is about the writing of Citizne Kane. Passable.

Pierre Cholot – co-scriptwriter (2 credits)

Little information available. Was a film editor in 1950s.

Edmond Richard – Cinematography (62 credits)

Known for this film and Chimes at Midnight (1965), Bunuel’s Discreet Charm of Bougoise (1972), Obsucre Object of Desire (1977), Phantom of Liberty (1974). Interstingly this was his first film! [Suggesting a lot of input by Welles.]

Jean Mandaroux – Art Direction (4 credits)

Mostly known as a production designer (27 credits). Working in films since 1951.

Anthony Perkins – Joseph K (67 credits)

Prolific actor, often appearing in 'edgy' films. 'Nervous, sweet but often unbalanced characters.'

Was a huge admirer of Orson Welles, and was even planning on writing a book about him, but aborted the project in fear of upsetting his idol. Welles later said that he would have loved the idea. Stated his greatest professional pride came in being the star of a Welles-directed feature. Starred in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960)

Not well known is that he was a singer.

Production

Welles began the production in Yugoslavia. To create Josef K.'s workplace, he created a set in an exposition hall just outside Zagreb, where 850 secretaries banged typewriters at 850 office desks. Other sequences were later shot in Dubrovnik, Rome, Milan and Paris.^[9] Welles was not able to film *The Trial* in Kafka's home city of Prague, as his work was seen as decadent by the communist government in Czechoslovakia.^[2]

In Paris, Welles planned to shoot the interiors of his film at the Bois de Boulogne studios, but Salkind had difficulties collecting promised capital to finance the film. Instead, he used the Gare d'Orsay, an abandoned Parisian railway station. Welles rearranged his set design to accommodate this new setting, and he later defended his decision to film at Gare d'Orsay in an interview with Cahiers du cinéma, where he stated: "Everything was improvised at the last moment, because the whole physical concept of my film was quite different. It was based on the absence of sets. And the gigantic nature of the sets, which people have objected to, is partly due to the fact that the only setting I had was that old abandoned station."^[9]

Trivia

When the film came out, Orson Welles called this his best movie. Later, he picked "Falstaff (Chimes at Midnight) (1965)."

The scene of K's office was filmed in the Paris train station, Gare d'Orsay, shortly after it was closed and before it became an art museum.

Orson Welles originally wanted Jackie Gleason to play the advocate. Welles was going to play the priest, which would have made the fable in the beginning further justified.

Oddity – Katina Paxinou had a small role that was cut. Welles left her name in the publicity however. (Welles' theory - people would return to see the film again, as they missed it first time round!)

Analysis

Philosophy

<http://philfilms.utm.edu/1/trial.htm>

Reviews / Analysis

Temenuga Trifonova

Senses of Cinema - February 2006

CTEQ Annotations on Film - Issue 38

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 anti-humanism.

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.

Queer Aspect

<https://queeringthecloset.blogspot.com/2014/08/queer-review-trial-1962.html>

Wikipedia re Kafka and his books

Famous story is Max Brod his literary executor edited the unfinished text. Kafka had left instructions for his works to be burnt. Now considered one of the 'great' books of last century.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Trial

Five major perspectives:

- [Biographical](#)
- Historical-critical: against the background of the social tensions in [Austria-Hungary](#) prior to the outbreak of [World War I](#)
- [Religious](#): especially regarding Kafka's [Jewish](#) descent – Hasidic tradition

- Psychoanalytical: *The Trial* as a symbol of the awareness and projection of an inner process (in German, the word *Prozess* can refer to both a trial and a process)
- Political and sociological: as a criticism of an autonomous and inhuman bureaucracy and of a lack of civil rights