

## THE MEDIUM ON TRIAL: ORSON WELLES TAKES ON KAFKA AND CINEMA

Few American directors have been as manifestly preoccupied with the uses and abuses of the media as Orson Welles. He became instantly famous in 1938 when his radio show *The War of the Worlds*, a simulation of a news broadcast announcing that Martians had just invaded New Jersey, managed to induce mass panic in an audience who took the hoax for an actual event.<sup>1</sup> People packed the roads, hid in cellars, loaded guns, and even wrapped their heads in wet towels as protection from Martian poison gas. As recently as 2005, an *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* article titled "The Future of Officer Safety in an Age of Terrorism" informed that no event provided as reliable a picture of open mass panic as the reception of Welles's *War of the Worlds* (Buerger and Levin). His contemporaries did not miss Welles's lesson, with commentators pointing out that the broadcast was meant to reveal the way politicians could use the power of mass communications to manipulate the public with empty but dangerous illusions.<sup>2</sup> After this dramatic demonstration of the power of the media, specifically radio, to manipulate the public, Welles turned to filmmaking. His debut, *Citizen Kane* (1941), was immediately recognized as an unflagging critique of the corruption of the media, this time of newspapers. While Welles's critique of radio and printed media has been extensively discussed, his critique of his main medium—film—has received little critical attention. In this essay I focus on *The Trial* (Orson Welles, 1962), which I argue provides Welles's most thought-provoking interrogation of film: its aesthetics, politics, ethics, and its relationship to the literature it self-consciously adapts.

Although Orson Welles considered *The Trial* "the best film [he] ever made," critics have often described it "as the hardest to watch" of all his films (Wheldon; McBride 155). Joseph McBride traces "the film's ultimate failure" to the irreconcilable discrepancy between Kafka's and Welles's world views: Kafka's penchant for cat-and-mouse games, with the omnipotent narrator amusedly orchestrating and watching the confused, panicked struggle of an already doomed hero, is often seen as incompatible with Orson Welles's "egocentric visual style."<sup>3</sup> I argue that rather than an incidental failure, the conflictual relationship between the movie and the story is carefully played out as one of the film's central investigations. As we will see in detail, Welles self-consciously opens and closes the film on the question of adaptation, which as a result frames the film. However, when it comes to adaptation, there are frames and frames. The frame could delimit the movie from the story and thus present it as an autonomous artifact. Or on the contrary, this frame could turn out to be more of a Procrustean bed, imposing the constraints of the story onto a movie that, try as it may, just does not fit. To frame, the *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us, can mean "to give structure, shape," and thus "to benefit." But it can also mean "to pre-arrange (something), esp. surreptitiously and with sinister intent"; "to fabricate"; "to concoct a false charge or accusation"; "to devise a scheme or plot"; "to frame-up."<sup>4</sup> Having made *Touch of Evil*, a film where he played a cop specializing in frame-ups, Welles knew well that in telling a compelling story, in making a case, framing and framing

up can become entangled. So how does the adaptation of Kafka's story frame Welles's movie? I propose we start by zooming our critical eye closely onto this frame, paying particular attention to the points of jointure where story and film meet.

*The Trial* opens with Welles's prefatory commentary on the entangled intertwining of different media and art forms such as film, literature, and drawing, and on film's potential to offer a solution to impassés arrived at in other media. Welles's voice-over recounts the parable of the Law from Kafka's novel, while a series of black-and-white drawings are used as a schematic illustration. These illustrations were provided by Alexander Alexeieff and Claire Parker, the inventors of a particular animation technique called the pinscreen. "This involved a ... board in which a million headless pins were placed ... Black and white images were created by gradating the pins in the fashion required and lighting them in a specific way" (Wells 47). A long-time book illustrator, Alexeieff together with Parker embraced this painstaking technique because it expressed their desire to copy the textures and shades of painting, and to emphasize the page-like quality of the screen.<sup>5</sup> Suspended between the credits and the first shot of the story itself, Alexeieff and Parker's illustrations are set apart from the rest of the film by the emphasis on still images and voice as well as by the citation of the parable. The movie self-consciously places itself as an adaptation of a material that is foreign to its medium, a text that precedes the movie and imposes its foregone conclusion and grim moral before the movie has a chance to even begin.

The choice of the parable, a text that is framed by Kafka as a citation from the Scriptures of the Law and an allegory for his whole story, suggests that adaptation and citation are already at work in the story before its adaptation in the film medium even starts. In Welles's own scenario, the parable ended with the following phrases, discarded in the final version of the movie:

This is a story inside history. Opinions differ on this point, but the error lies in believing that the problem can be resolved merely through special knowledge or perspicacity—that it is a mystery to be solved ... A true mystery is unfathomable and nothing is hidden inside it. There is nothing to explain ... It has been said that the logic of this story is the logic of a dream. Do you feel lost in a labyrinth? Do not look for a way out. You will not be able to find it ... There is no way out. (Welles 17)

The story appears as a confining surface, placed as the boundary between a negated

inside and outside: there is nothing inside the mystery and nothing outside of it. This story is illustrated in the beginning of the movie by the emphatically two-dimensional pinscreen illustrations that foreground a formidable gate (Figs. 1-3). This gate is defined as a space that both denies entrance and paralyzes the man who seeks admittance and the guard into lifelong stasis. The space where the traveler came from, the space before

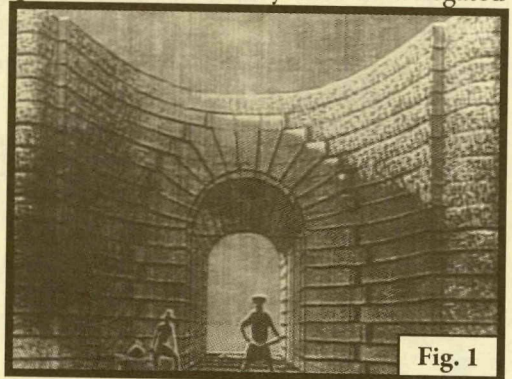


Fig. 1

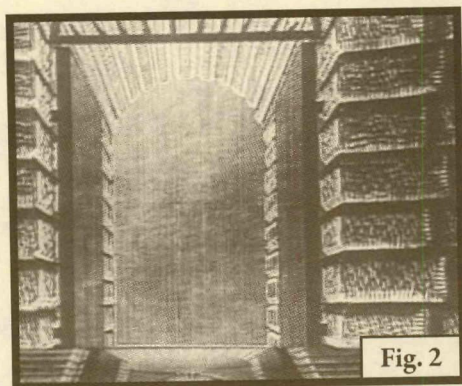


Fig. 2

The explicit moral of the story, “there is no way out,” is doubly reinforced: by the spatial staging of the story, with its foregrounding of the forbidding gate, as well as by the patently two-dimensional medium of the pinscreen slides that ingeniously conflate the screen with the gate.

The question of a way out from the logic of Kafka’s story is critical not only for K but also for Welles as the director of *The Trial*. This superimposition between the figure of Joseph K and that of the director, both threatened to be caught in the predestined, claustrophobic nightmare of Kafka’s story, is reinforced by Welles’s confession to his friend, filmmaker Henry Jaglom, that *The Trial* “was the most autobiographical movie he ever made” (qtd. in Guthmann). Jaglom elaborated on this comment by adding that “[Welles] and I shared this recurring dream of being in jail and not knowing why. He said the difference between us was that in his dream he never got out” (qtd. in Guthmann). Imagining oneself on trial must have been a common nightmare at the time, with the government-supported media doing its best to promote it. Nineteen sixty-two, the year when *The Trial* came out, also saw the release of *Red Nightmare* (Waggner), a cooperation between Warner Brothers and The Defense Department that became a standard part of school curricula in civics and history throughout the 1960s. *Red Nightmare* presents the story of an American everyman, Jerry Donovan, who, the narrator tells us, “tends to takes his liberties too much for granted” until he finds himself in the middle of a red nightmare. In his dream, communists take over his hometown, to the point of transforming his family members into compliant automatons.<sup>6</sup> The nightmare culminates in a trial scene as absurd as the one with which K is faced. Hollywood of course not only spread the fear of such nightmarish trials but also had its share of actual trials during the 1950’s Red Scare. Welles’s nightmare echoes the words of a famous subject of such a trial, Bertolt Brecht, who confessed to Walter Benjamin: “I often imagine being interrogated by a tribunal. ‘Now tell us, Mr. Brecht, are you really in earnest?’” (qtd. in Benjamin 87).

the gate, is also denied him, or made into a non-space by his obsession with the gate: he sees no way back just as he sees no way through the gate. Later in the movie, these illustrations of the parable of the Law are shown to be slides projected on a screen by K’s advocate. The screen onto which they are projected is not simply used to represent the gate; the screen becomes itself a gate where the slides and the shadows of K and his advocate are symbolically captured on a two-dimensional surface.

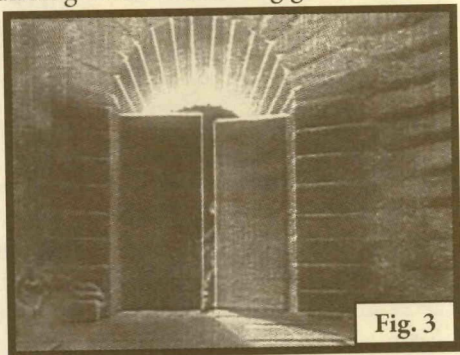


Fig. 3

Like Brecht, Welles was also the subject of a long investigation carefully recorded in his FBI file.<sup>7</sup> He came to the FBI's attention in 1941, and was then followed as a "communist" (although the file notes repeatedly that he was not a member of the communist party) and as "a threat to internal security."<sup>8</sup> He thus shared with Joseph K the experience of being placed under an investigation that had been initiated for nebulous reasons (possibly a denunciation), and which soon extended into the most intimate aspects of his life, such as his relationship with his wife and his extramarital affairs (Federal Bureau of Investigation). It is no accident that, as Randy Rasmussen noted, "in appearance" the two strangers who intrude upon K "could be American FBI agents circa 1962" (182). The extent to which Welles managed to escape the confining scripts of his FBI file or of Hollywood's culture industry remains open for debate, with Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno taking the most negative stance: "Whenever Orson Welles offends against the tricks of the trade, he is forgiven because his departures from the norm are regarded as calculated mutations which serve all the more strongly to confirm the validity of the system" (qtd. in Rasmussen 182). *The Trial* obliquely addresses these questions while self-consciously facing the challenge of the film's ability to escape the confining logic of Kafka's story.

### No Way Out?

Welles's retelling of the parable ends by framing the initial dilemma of the movie in spatial terms: "there is no way out." However, once the succession of drawings is over and the first shot of K appears on the screen, the spectator is offered a certain three-dimensionality. Is it possible that enacting the story in the medium of the film could bestow upon it a certain depth and thus a certain "outside?" This three-dimensional character of the film can surely at any time be revealed as a ruse of a flatly two-dimensional screen. But could the mere illusion of three-dimensionality be powerful enough to unsettle the surface and open up some cracks in the mirroring walls of the story? *The Trial* opens on this question of media, retelling and adaptation, then installs itself in one medium, that of film, lets it reenact the story, and ends by having this question resurface in the final scene. While this initial examination of the different spatial qualities of different media informs our viewing of the entire movie, the explicit question is suspended until the end of the movie, and we are made to penetrate inside the space created in the movie itself. The meta-commentary that the film opens on is most powerfully replayed in the actual treatment of space in the film, especially the treatment of boundaries and spaces of transit.

For K too, the dilemma is often expressed in spatial terms. Throughout the movie, he keeps asking "to be let out," "to go outside," and he is often reprimanded for his desire by reminders that he "has no place to go." The architecture of the city in the movie is stunningly varied. K meanders through the alienating concrete of 1950's building projects such as his home and his office, the turn-of-the-century décor of a metropolitan railway station turned into the Court of Justice, the gothic thunder and candle-lit house of his advocate, and the modest muddy streets of a provincial Central European town. Such an agglomeration of heterogeneous urban landscape seems to suggest the endless proliferation of surfaces delimiting interior and exterior spaces, insides and outsides, passageways, journeys, possible detours, or alternative

routes. The architectural landmarks in the city seem to be divided by more than a street or a corner, by different time periods and styles, to the point where their appurtenance to the same urban landscape seems fantastic. Thus, the architecture of the film seems at first sight not only to create a labyrinth with myriad insides and outsides, but also to question the coherence of the city as one engulfing structure.

The information that we have about the sets of *The Trial* might help explain this perception of the city.<sup>10</sup> Welles bragged about *The Trial's* over-the-shoulder shots that switched among Paris, Zagreb, and Rome. The courts of Law, as well as the interior of the church, were filmed in the deserted Gare D'Orsay in Paris, now a museum. Welles had himself created the sketches for the sets of *The Trial*. The night before he left for Yugoslavia to start shooting the film, his producers told him there was no money to build the sets, and thus he needed to shoot on location. Welles humorously remembers pacing around his room and looking out at the moon, in search of inspiration. But instead of one moon, he noticed two full moons, which turned out to be the faces of the clock at the Gare D'Orsay. Welles got into a cab at four a.m. and spent the rest of the night walking through the deserted train station. The problem of the sets was thus solved and the next day he left for Yugoslavia, where he shot the church, as well as many of the exterior scenes. The exterior of the courts of the Law, where K meets his cousin Irmie at the feet of the towering sculptures, was filmed in front of the Ministry of the Navy in Rome. As the film freely roams through various cities of Europe, it might seem like there is no danger of feeling confined or locked into one space.

However, the guided city tour that we are offered is closely following K's trajectory, his desire and impossibility to get out, his realization that there is "no place to go." In the process, this potentially heterogeneous city loses its insides and outsides, its sidewalks and shortcuts, and appears as a terrible trap, whose only outside is a "no place." One of the main techniques used in the construction of space is the constant abrupt cutting among architectural landmarks. K is hardly ever shown on his way anywhere. He is hardly ever in the streets, which makes for an extremely brusque transition among scenes. He is often in front of some gate, but upon exiting such a gate he finds himself in another enclosed space, or in an only deceptively open space (Fig. 3). Thus, in the first scene, when an unknown man whom he takes for an inspector invades his room, K attempts to use both doors of his room to get out. One goes into the corridor, where another stranger is waiting for him, the other one into his neighbor's, Miss Burstner's, room, where he is startled to find his officemates fiddling with her family photos. Once in her room, K soon directs himself to the balcony door. However, as he steps out to get some air, he is surprised to find the police inspector already there, watching him. The inspector accuses him of attracting the attention of neighbors, who are indeed curiously peering from the building opposite his. This outside space is thus not one of escape, but one that makes K's captivity visible. The thick railing of the balcony stops K's literal escape while the curious, surveying looks of the neighbors across the street stop his gaze and return it to the place of his captivity. The street is hardly the space of an escape as much as the walled-in interval of captivity in which K's gaze, if not body, travels only back and forth. The first major change of décor from K's apartment to his office happens with

no transition other than a fade-out between a medium close-up shot of the doors closing to a medium close-up of K entering a vast office.

In the beginning of the movie, this consistent absence of intermediary spaces among the major architectural settings appears to be created by the camera. Our expectations and previous knowledge of real cities make us fill in the blanks and imagine that these spaces exist and are cut. This cutting of transit scenes is not immediately felt as particularly jarring, since it follows, if only to excess, a rather canonical rule of mainstream filmmaking. However, as the spatial logic of the story is revealed, we realize that the city through which K wanders in pursuit of a solution for his case is particular precisely in the unbearable continuity and lack of borders among different literal as well as psychic spaces.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, K leaves his advocate's house and arrives at the decrepit building that houses the studio of the artist Titorelli. He soon learns that the studio is separated from the courts of the law by a rickety door often used by the judges, and that in fact the studio belongs to the court. The movement of the camera seems here to prefigure the hidden reality of the city. Prefiguring is an extremely important device in the film, the very motor that activates the infernal machine of the court. Thus, when the inspector first makes his appearance in K's room, he seems to be completely ignorant of any charge against K or Miss Burstner. He might not even be an inspector. The man, inspector or not, is just always ready to follow K's self-doubting and incriminating presuppositions—that the man is an inspector, that he might want to see K's papers, that it is K who he is looking for. Similarly, K himself is responsible for the creation of the enclosing, continuous space of the city. When he looks for the artist, he does so independently of any interest in his art. He looks for the artist, as he does for women, in strict connection with his case. It is thus not surprising that the artist turns out to be just one of the acolytes of the law. Following this logic, it seems only fitting that the film emphasizes the fact that the movements of the camera create a certain filmic space that precedes, and maybe produces, the nightmarish architecture of the city.

Transit spaces are not *completely* excluded from the movie. After all, the movie uses as its main set a gigantic abandoned railway station. Formerly a hub, a space of transit that made movement possible, this railway has been cut from all movement, and presently stalls it. The railway station becomes in the film *The Court of Law*, a place that the accused do not simply visit; rather, they are detained there in endless expectation, to the point where they start squatting in the building, their wash hanging from the ceilings. As the gate of the Law, the railway station is another fundamental space of transit that is depleted of its initial role; the traveler that is approaching it as a place of transit is caught by its lure in impotent immobility. K indeed realizes that the proliferation of transit spaces is an ironically confounding hurdle to his desire to get out. He tells the court guard: "I just want to get out of here ... You'd better show me yourself ... There's so many passages and lobbies, I'll never find the way ... I just want to get out of here and be alone" (Welles 112). Again, the movie does not simply select traditionally closed spaces in order to give the impression of confinement; rather, it takes the very epitome of movement, transit spaces, and transforms them into hopeless traps for the traveler. As such, its confinement is more encompassing, since it affects the very places—gateways, passageways, railway stations—which

humans traverse as travelers. In the film, these former transit spaces seem to offer these trapped travelers a home, but it is a home that looks, as we will presently see, more like a camp—the double negation of both one's traditional home and of the freedom to travel.

While static, confining environments crowd the movie and transit spaces are revealed to be similarly limiting, the few instances where open, exterior spaces appear are charged with meaning and deserve close examination. In the very beginning of his tribulations, K is asked to leave his seat in the opera house and to follow a crude map guiding him to the Court of Law. On his guided way he comes to a large open space outside the Courts of Law. Here a mass of haggard, silent people wearing metal slates with numbers rather than clothes stand motionless, staring vacantly past K. (Figs. 4-5). Placed in their midst, an ambiguous statue covered in a ghostly white cloth presents a striking spectacle. If most statues monumentalize and publicly express the values of those erecting them, this statue only expresses the mystifyingly, purposefully cryptic character of

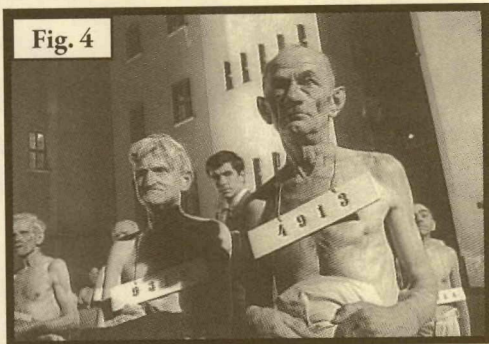


Fig. 4

the power that erected it. Through its proximity to the searing image of the suffering victims at its feet, the statue comes to be ambiguously associated with the faceless, mysterious law condemning K. The next instance of a conspicuously haunting open space is present in the scene of K's return home to find a crippled, unknown woman carrying the trunk of his neighbor and romantic interest, Miss Burstner.



Fig. 5

While he seems troubled by her absence and inquires about her future, K rationalizes and thus accepts the logic of her departure—she has been chased off by the landlady because she keeps odd hours.

Both the space of this conversation and that of the statue recur at the end of the movie. Upon leaving the cathedral, K is forcefully dragged outside of the city by his appointed murderers. From the cathedral, the traditional center of the city, he goes toward the outskirts, and on his last walk, he unites all the disjointed landmarks of the city and of his former tribulations. First conflated by the camera movement, then by the engulfing logic of the law or of K's fear, the links among the different architectures of the city are now revealed. They suddenly connect the disjointed decors of the film in a surprisingly realistic geography of a city that, while appearing extremely concrete, has a certain generality, to the point where it could be representing any Central European city. In this sequence, the cathedral and the old city center are explicitly adjacent to the modern architecture of the city; then the camera follows K passing a newer residential area and arriving at the outskirts

populated by modest, one-story houses. In the course of this forced trajectory, K is finally getting out of the city, but as Leni warned him, this "out" is revealed to be a no place, sheer nothingness. Welles describes this movement as representative for the treatment of space to be initially developed throughout the whole film: "In the production as I originally envisaged it, the sets were to gradually disappear. The number of realistic elements was to gradually diminish, and to be seen to diminish by the spectators, until only open space remained, as if everything had been dissolved away" (Welles 11).<sup>12</sup> And indeed the architectural space is gradually disintegrating, to the point where all recognizable structures disappear. K passes some discarded concrete circles that instead of being used as building material painfully enclose air, creating crooked, concrete zeros, a nothingness that is however still confining, limiting. Past these concrete structures, outside of the city, K again sees the statue, but the naked people formerly at her feet are now gone. The statue is there to mark the place of their disappearance, to break the news of their absence to K as to us. The series of desolate street lights, marking a road to nowhere, also spells out the absence of the crippled woman as well as of Miss Burstner, absences to which K's indifference makes him an accomplice.

This open space does not represent the disappearance of confines and boundaries, but rather points to many disappearances, likely deaths. It is thus used by the two appointed murderers, who take K there in order to kill him. Escaping the immense, crushing structures of the city, one indeed does not find anything, not a space but a negation of space, poignantly represented by the huge hole in the ground that turns out to be the murderers' destination. This is a space that is carved out, an absence of space that is an accomplice to murder as it hides it from view and buries the bodies of those who have disappeared.

Thus the treatment of transit spaces in the film develops through three main stages. At first, the lack of such spaces seems to be a stylistic choice, possibly an exacerbation of the canonical technique of cutting dead time among the main scenes so as to accelerate action. This teleologically oriented way of telling coincides with K's logic and hurries him without any respite, without detour and the possibility of a side escape, toward the catastrophic ending, as if participating in the criminal scenario of the Law. Soon, this choice of the camera is revealed to be not a random stylistic choice but rather to prefigure the actual architectural logic of the law, which catches the city into its web and destroys any spaces exterior to its reach or power. And finally, as K walks out of the city carried by his executioners, the disjointed and nightmarish spaces created by elaborate camera movements and editing throughout the movie are dissolved. They leave room for a realistic, minimally cut sequence of an ordinary European town. But this banal, special-effect free image of the city has been unrecognizably estranged by the combined logic of the camera and of the story. The film has transformed each building into the suspicious site of the law, the site of an accusation or of an execution. The story is not confined to a nightmare or to the movie house; its logic insinuates itself and contaminates the real and its landscapes. The last engulfing annihilation of boundaries that the film enacts is that between its cinematic space and the space of the contemporary viewer's extradiegetic reality.

## Violent Light

This violence, this contamination of the real with the nightmarish logic of the film brings us back to the initial question of the camera's position toward the terrifying story it tells as toward its spectators. One of the scenes that intricately addresses this question is K's visit to the studio of the painter Titorelli (played by William Chappell but dubbed entirely with Welles's own voice) (Naremore, *The Magic* 202). A myriad of claustrophobic interiors crowd the space

of the film. The advocate's house has a cell-like peephole. When K first leaves the advocate's residence, Leni hands him the keys to the house through the large open spaces between the metal bars that have replaced the wall. Most glass surfaces in the



Fig. 6

film are made of frozen glass divided by metal grids—the most daunting being the gigantic wall of the Court of Law and the ceiling to the advocate's house. But if all these buildings reveal their traps gradually as one element of their intricate architecture, the artist's studio is stripped of all pretense and ornamentation, and presents itself as

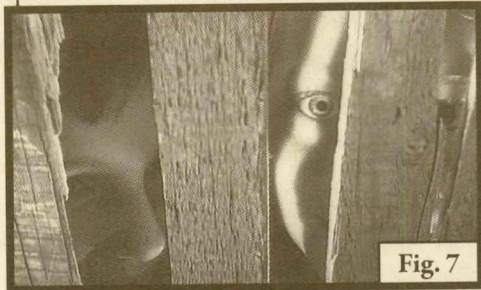


Fig. 7

a human cage. The long wooden slats that make up the walls and ceiling of the artist's studio allow streaks of light to come in and be reflected in such a way as to create a striking grid of light and darkness (Figs. 6-8). The raw material of film, the superimposition and play of light and darkness becomes here a confining structure inside which both the artist and the protagonist of the movie are enclosed. This grid of light and darkness is the very medium through which a group of young girls aggressively peer into the studio and harass K with hardly dissimulated sexual aggression. Thus this grid, suggestive of the very medium of the film, becomes both a confining surface and a device for aggressive observation. These wooden slats that allow the girls to watch K also suggest how interchangeable the positions of those watching and those being watched really are, since they all "belong" to the court. Looking is here both tormenting and corrupting. The porosity of the boundary between voyeur and object of pleasure or hunt, between spectator and actor, does not bring any freedom, but rather sleazy complicity inside a vaster, less palpable confinement.

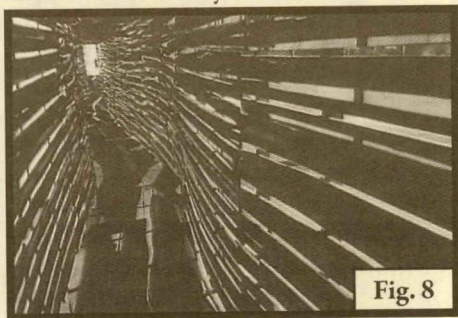


Fig. 8

The treatment of light in *The Trial* is a privileged example of Welles's self-reflective meditation on the medium of film. The very substance of film, light is

not limited to creating confining spaces. It can become an instrument of torture. The large building structures in the movie are often revealed to contain cell-like rooms. Thus, K happens into a singularly small, windowless room inside his office building only to find the two police inspectors that had arrested him being molested by a third man. The instrument this man uses is the oscillating light bulb. When hit, the light bulb hits in turn the victims and at the same time creates the special camera effects appropriate for such a scene. This violent manipulation

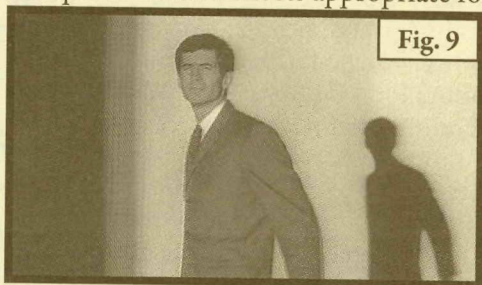


Fig. 9

of light and darkness might be set up in order to convince K to succumb to the pressures of his case. Real violence and make-believe are played upon each other in this scene, attracting our attention to the theatricality and possible self-referentiality of the scene. The actual moment of violence

a moment of darkness; it is K as well as we, the spectators, who interpret this darkness as violence, thus imaginatively perpetrating it. The violent manipulation of light and darkness here speaks of the camera's power to draw us into an act of violence and make us accomplices to it, by what it shows and what it leaves unseen. It also points to the ambiguity in the purpose of this manipulation, which can be done so as not to harm the supposed victims but that intrudes on us as spectators.

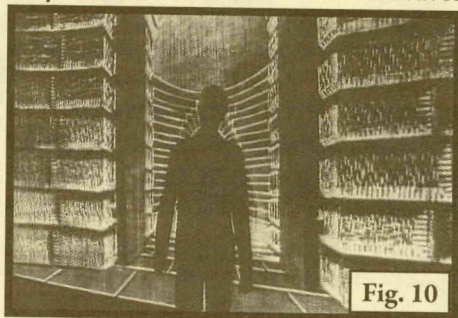


Fig. 10

In the last encounter with K, the advocate makes explicit the relationship between the law and generators of light and darkness, such as the slide projector: "K: 'What's this?' He arrives at the source of light—'a light projector ...' Advocate: 'We use these as visual aids'" (Welles 166). The slides shown on the screen shed a new light on the beginning of the movie, showing the pinscreen illustrations of the parable of the Law to be projected by the advocate. As the advocate shows the first image of the gate and says: "A man comes from the country," K walks toward the screen and his dark shadow seems

to act out the advocate's scenario (Figs. 9-12). As we have already seen in the beginning of this paper, the screen not only represents the gate, it also acts as a gate. It captures K's three-dimensionality and his movements on the plane surface. Further, it hinders him or his shadow from getting to the other side of the screen. At the end of our



Fig. 11

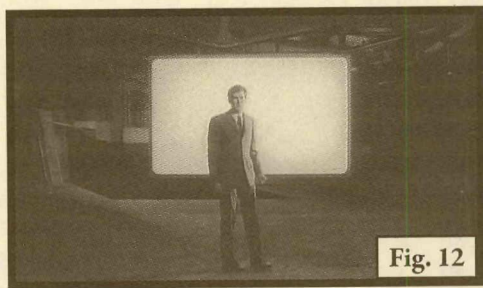


Fig. 12

and the characters' immersion in the film medium, the two-dimensionality of the first static drawings has been indeed challenged, and the revisitation of that image has received an extra dimension—depth, and agency—in the person of the advocate projecting the slides. However, this extra-dimension remains from the beginning to the end limited by the

screen/gate in the background. This film only allows the hero the superficial depth of the space immediately in front of the gate, a space where he can carry on about his desire “to get out”; but the film never allows K a peek at the space behind the gate/screen, supposedly a space of redemption. The parable that prefaced the film also closes it, in a circular structure that catches K in the middle, as one particular victim in an already predestined, carefully manipulated plot. The screen is here the sticky enclosing surface where K is caught. The screen then not only makes visible K's captivity, but it is also instrumental in capturing his image, distracting his attention, and acting as a barrier between him and a possible outside.

However the film continues past the slide projection scene. In Kafka's story, K is taken outside of the city and stabbed “like a dog” (Kafka 229). Welles's ending is the major change that he introduced into the plot. After politely passing each other the knife over K's bare chest, the executioners climb out of the pit leaving K with a burning stick of dynamite. Laughing hysterically, K bends down and picks up something (possibly the dynamite) and throws it out of the pit. A huge explosion follows, and a series of dissolving shots track the transformations of the smoke that finally freezes into a mushroom-shaped cloud (Fig. 13). Orson Welles explained that this ending was made necessary by the intercalation of the Holocaust in the time between Kafka's story and the writing of the film:

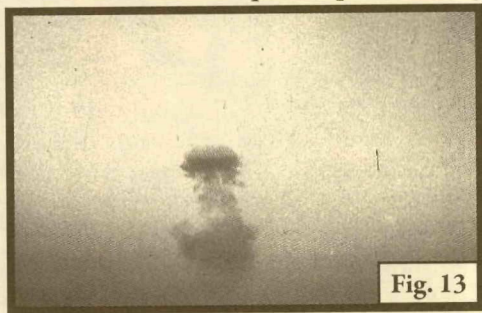


Fig. 13

I'm not a Kafka analyst .... [K] doesn't fight. Perhaps he should, but I don't take sides in my film. All I allow him to do is to defy the executioners at the end. Q: There is a version of the scenario with a different ending, where K is stabbed to death by his executioners. Welles: I don't like that ending. To me it's a “ballet,” written by a Jewish intellectual before the advent of Hitler. Kafka wouldn't have put that after the death of six million Jews. It all seems very much pre-Auschwitz to me. I don't mean that my ending was a particularly good one, but it was the only possible solution. I had to step up the pace, if only for a few moments. (Welles 9)

This is an ending for a “story inside history,” a story whose retelling, Welles believes, must take into consideration the intervening history of the Holocaust.<sup>13</sup> In his defense of his film's difference from Kafka's text, Welles professes an ethical obligation to be

unfaithful to Kafka, to tell a different story. If it is true, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue, that one of “the two problems” that “enthralled” Kafka was “when can one say that a statement is new?” it may be that it is precisely through the struggle to tell a new story, to break out of the logic of the foregone conclusions of Kafka’s *Trial*, that Welles comes closest to Kafka (83). Welles’s belated desire to change the ending of such past stories, of stories with heroes already buried before the beginning of the film, shows to what extent the freedom of such choices, even for the director whose desire was to celebrate individual freedom, is limited. Once such a story has been set in motion, its logic cannot be easily circumvented or broken out of. The most Welles can grant his hero is the last minute refusal to collaborate with his murderers, and the violent destruction of the world of the story/film that is replaced by a column of smoke.<sup>14</sup> The most Welles can grant himself as a director is the choice between two catastrophic endings, the choice of the lesser evil rather than that of a happy end. Coming out of a hole in the ground that has witnessed in the film the disappearance of the number-marked victims and taking the form of a nuclear explosion, the column of smoke that ends the film painfully expresses the ambiguity of World War II. This densely packed image evokes the destruction of the Holocaust as well as the lateness and destruction that accompanied the solution to that evil. The heritage of these events lingers in the disquieting threat of the mushroom cloud, whose image refuses to be contained in the past, or in the diegetic space of the movie, and invades the closing credits.

The question that we saw the film pose in its beginning—is it possible that enacting Kafka’s story in the medium of film could bestow upon it a certain depth and thus a certain “outside?”—echoes throughout the film and is again addressed at the end. It ultimately turns out that breaching that question is the most that Welles’s *Trial* can do. Film appears not only powerless to change the story of Kafka’s *Trial* or the history connected to it; upon closer examination the medium of film appears itself as an accomplice in this dark mystery. The screen encloses both actors and spectators like a gate. Light devices are used by the court as visual aids, even as instruments of torture. *Mise-en-scène* and editing collude to rob any transit space of its potential to lead K to the much desired “outside.” The corrupt advocate, played by the director of our film, is an expert manipulator of such visual aids. Visual artists, like Titorelli, are cringing servants of the Law. Film, as Welles presents it in *The Trial*, does not oppose Kafka’s “cat and mouse games”; film might just supersede them as a more efficient technology.

Cristina Vatulescu  
New York University

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a thorough account of Welles’s career in the radio and of *The War of the Worlds*, see Paul Heyer, *The Medium and the Magician: Orson Welles, the Radio Years, 1934-1952*.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Thompson, *The New York Herald-Tribune* columnist, wrote: "Mr. Welles and the Mercury Theater of The Air have made one of the most fascinating and important demonstrations of all time. They have proved that a few effective voices, accompanied by sound effects, can convince masses of people of a totally unreasonable, completely fantastic proposition as to create a nation-wide panic." She also did not fail to make more specific political connections: "Hitler managed to scare all of Europe to its knees a month ago, but at least he had an army and an air force to back up his shrieking words. But Mr. Welles scared thousands into demoralization with nothing at all" (11-13).

<sup>3</sup> McBride suggests that "perhaps Orson Welles was correct when he said once [long before starting to work on the film] that a good film could be made from Kafka's novel but that he was not the man to do it ... The critical question is to what degree Welles's profoundly personal style can afford to accommodate the characters and meanings of a writer almost totally dissimilar in style and temperament" (155).

<sup>4</sup> "to frame" in *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>5</sup> Wells also notes that "Alexeieff's emphasis upon 'shade' in his imagery was essentially related to his interest in creating stories with narrative ambiguities and destabilized environments. His films seem dream-like and render the viewer uncertain and vulnerable ..." (47).

<sup>6</sup> In his overview of American cinema in 1962, Eric Schaffer picks *The Manchurian Candidate* as the most notable production of the year. Significantly, this is another film featuring brainwashed communist agents, sleeper assassins, and dream sequences that take over reality, part of "the cold war hysterics" that Schafer sees as dominating 1962's cinematic production in the US. As a result, Schaffer notes while "it may be an exaggeration to call it the worst year in American film history, ... by any measure it was a dreadful one" (68, 70).

<sup>7</sup> For a short and informative overview of Welles's file, see James Naremore, "The Trial: The FBI Vs. Orson Welles."

<sup>8</sup> The FBI's assessment of *Citizen Kane* is telling of these accusations: "The documentary evidence proves that the most intensive and extensive campaign which the [US] Communist Party has conducted throughout its entire history has been its anti-Hearst campaign ... The evidence before us leads inevitably to the conclusion that the film 'Citizen Kane' is nothing more than an extension of the Communist's Party's campaign to smear one of its most effective and consistent opponents in the United States [William Randolph Hearst, often identified as the real-life model for Kane]" (Federal Bureau of Investigation).

<sup>9</sup> Thus, after dispersing with the services of his advocate, K tells the advocate's housekeeper/mistress, "Leni: 'Open the door!' Leni: 'Where do you think you're going?' 'Open the door!' 'You must be crazy! There is no place for you to go'" (Welles, *The Trial* 142).

<sup>10</sup> This paragraph draws on Orson Welles's interviews with Peter Bogdanovich in Orson Welles, Peter Bogdanovich, and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *This is Orson Welles* 246-47.

<sup>11</sup> The topography of Kafka's novels and the importance of continuity as its underlying principle has been discussed in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* 63-80. Their fascinating discussion of continuity in Kafka, which contains a short reference to "the affinity of Welles's genius with Kafka," is concerned mainly with the dismantling of separate "blocks" and of "interiority." My discussion of continuity in Welles is concerned mostly with the negation of the exterior/outside.

<sup>12</sup> Welles describes the much-criticized gigantic sets of his production as a product of chance and necessity, working against his original design for the movie: "I had planned to make a completely different film. 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" (Welles, Bogdanovich, and Rosenbaum 247). K's last walk out of the city encapsulates in a short but strategically positioned moment this initial idea.

<sup>13</sup> This concern appears to be not just particular to Welles. Reviewing three adaptations of Kafka's *Trial*—a play by Jean-Louis Barrault and André Gide (1947), Welles's film, and an educational film titled *The Trials of Franz Kafka*, Peter Lev notes that "the most startling feature of all these adaptations is their reinterpretation of Kafka after World War II," in relationship to Nazism (184).

<sup>14</sup> For more about Welles's take on the difference between his ending and Kafka's, and specifically for his comments on K's refusal to collaborate with his assassins, see Huw Wheldon, "Orson Welles on The Trial."

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