Crystal Mills
ENG 2140 A
Prof. Peter Webb
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Modern Anxiety and the Absurd: Welles and Kafka's *The Trial*

James Naremore, in his essay on French criticism of American film noir, quotes Sartre as having "claimed that modern life had become 'fantastic', as if it were made up of a 'labyrinth of hallways, doors, and stairways that lead nowhere, innumerable signposts that dot routes and signify nothing'" (Naremore 110). Of Franz Kafka, and modernist literature generally, Camus warns that "nothing is harder to understand than a symbolic work. A symbol always transcends the one who makes use of it and makes him say in reality more than he is aware he is expressing" (Camus, *Hope* 147). In Kafka and Orson Welles's versions of *The Trial*, both thematically, logically, and imagistically labyrinthine if not entirely paradoxical, numerous interpretations are available, but their modern context of production is undeniable. Anxiety and alienation prevail in *The Trial*, the novel making use of speeches of impenetrable reason and meaning, the film externalizing the torture of the hero in bizarre and disorienting mise-en-scène, both to demonstrate an overarching mood of the post-industrial, post-God age. This anxiety, central to the surrealist or noir text, can be understood as a product of metaphysical strife, and the central concern of existentialists such as Sartre and Camus in their writings on freedom and absurdity. In attempting to define and delineate the history of the "oneric, bizarre, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel" (Naremore 109) work, Naremore references this connection:

> The importance of existentialism to the period has long been recognized; what needs to be emphasized is that French existentialism was intertwined

> with a residual surrealism, which was crucial for the reception of any art described as noir (108).

Locating and investigating anxiety in *The Trial* by Kafka and Welles will show that both author and auteur use different techniques complimentary to their mediums to express the condition characteristic of the modern period, which can in turn be thematically interpreted through French existentialist ideas.

While a tone of anxiety is easily intuited, to describe its production is often more challenging. In Kafka's *The Trial*, secondary characters comment on the state of Joseph K. as being "dejected" (133), "agitated", or "bother[ed]" (101), the standard defendant as "timid and disconcerted" (115), and even the officials as "irritable, even when they appear calm" (118). Kafka's narrative style is that of comfortable, mundane realism, disturbed from the first sentence by an unusual event that increases in absurdity throughout the text: "The sense of impending doom and the anxiety of the main character awaiting something which is entirely irrational, becomes so much more realistic because it is narrated in a crisp, reportorial style" (Spiro 169). This objective prose compliments its subject K. as the quintessential everyman, not distinctive in his personality nor compelling in psychological distress because he is little more than an elaborate retelling of the parable of the doorkeeper told by the priest. Additionally, the reader as the modern man is alienated by the text, just as his fictional analgoue K., as the narrative circumvents the questions imperative to an understanding of the trial process and thus the plot itself.

Welles's adaptation of *The Trial* achieves a feeling consistent with Kafka's novel by employing noir techniques in lighting, camera movement and set design. Welles's voiceover introduces the film as intentionally absurd, "that the logic of this story is the logic of a dream, of a nightmare," and thus chooses to "intensify the surrealist

atmosphere of violent confusion or disequilibrium" (Naremore 109). Space is manipulated by scenes of alternating vast, empty interiors, desolate exteriors, and claustrophobic, crowded rooms: "Nothing is natural. . .The visual environment creates an oppressive tone that has some kinship with Kafka's anxiety" (Lev 183). As the viewer is disoriented by the "world of shadows and angular distortion" (Adams 141), he finds himself in sympathy with K.'s "fragmented psyche" (Adams 142) represented visually in the flashing light sources and spinning camera angles.

The women of *The Trial* are enigmatic in their purpose and placement in both the novel and film, appearing as dream-like, Freudian projections, but more importantly, acting as a supplementary source of anxiety for K. As the modern worker became alienated according to the Marxist view of production, women demanded entrance to social, political, and intellectual spheres previously restricted to men. Contemporary works such as T.S. Eliot's "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" and Aldous Huxley's *Chrome Yellow* describe feeble and anxious heroes particularly tormented by strong women suitors perceived as a challenge to their masculinity. Joseph K.'s first sexually charged encounter of *The Trial* occurs with Fräulein Bürstner, a woman of a mildly scandalous profession, but who passively allows K. dominance in their exchange: in the film lying prone with closed eyes, and in the novel being "seized" (33) repeatedly and receiving kisses "as if she were unaware of it" (33). Here, K. preserves the traditionally masculine role as sexual aggressor and "reflect[s] briefly on his conduct: he was pleased with it" (34). However, as his unease develops over the course of his trial, so do the women become correspondingly more commanding. From the washerwoman's pleas for rescue, to Leni's fetish for the accused, and culminating in K.'s escape from Titorelli's

studio pursued by a mob of "deprav[ed]" (141) young girls. Just as the women are sexually aggressive, they are further portrayed as "predatory" (Adams 152) with the introduction of the painting of Justice transformed into "the goddess of the Hunt" (146), as well as deformed, with limps, hunchbacks, and webbed fingers representing some further corruption of person. Such a misogynistic view of female sexuality was a response to the encroachment of historically male public spheres, and often masked anxiety and feelings of powerlessness and emasculation.

Jeffrey Adams suggests that noir style "emerges as a stabilizing value" in the wake of "the existentialist loss of meaning" (Adams 144) in the modernist text, film, and world. Marx and Hegel attribute alienation, and concurrent feelings of angst and anxiety, to the industrialization of labour, and the worker's dissociation from the product of his efforts. Welles's version emphasizes this socio-political aspect of Kafka's text in depicting the "sense of overwhelming bureaucratic structures" (Adams 146) as part of K.'s life before his arrest, his desk placed at the head of hundreds of typists in a hangar-like space. While worker alienation can be traced thematically in Kafka's *The Trial*, the ambiguity of K.'s unease lends itself to metaphysical explanation.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the death of God at the hands of geological and evolutionary research, extending the history of the earth billions of years and placing in question man's once central role and defined purpose. Sartre describes God as the Creator of man, who, like man when he creates an object with specific intelligence and design, instills purpose in the product (Sartre 344). Without God, man loses "the sense that [he] is 'essential' to the constitution of the world, that he has a 'mission' to ensure that there is a structured reality at all" (Cooper 32). For K., the feeling

of alienation from the natural, God-inhabited world precedes his accusation by the law, but has been anesthetized by his faith in the replacing ordered system of "a state governed by law" and "universal peace" (6): "For the most part, people suppress a sense of alienation from the world by becoming 'absorbed' in...the comforting, ready-made schemes of beliefs and values which prevail in their societies" (Cooper 33). When K.'s confidence in structure begins to fail, recognizing the court system as an "infinitely expanding hierarchy" (Adams 146) where order and reason are presumed but not apparent to any individual involved, K. is left abandoned by the nineteenth century homocentric world and placed in contest with the modern all-encompassing system he once took for granted.

Sartre further proposes, as a result of modern alienation, that "since there is no God to conceive [of human nature]...man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (Sartre 345). Man is "condemned to freedom", because without purpose, every action an individual chooses not only defines his own person, but acts as an affirmation and definition of humanity as a whole. K. chooses to participate in his case. The second chapter opens to a description of him living life as before the accusation, and he occasionally considers the possibility of learning to "live outside the trial" (214) or ignore it altogether. The prison chaplain emphasizes the passivity of the law which arrests but does not physically restrict, and by extension the enormity of K.'s own agency: "The court wants nothing from you. It receives you when you come and dismisses you when you go" (224).

In a chapter dedicated to detailed, but unfailingly inscrutable, explication, the narrator relates a story wherein a gathering of lawyers, in an attempt to push past a

rebellious court official, "decided to try to wear the old gentleman down. One lawyer at a time would rush up the stairs and, offering the greatest possible passive resistance, allow himself to be thrown back down, where he would then be caught by his colleagues" (119). When the lawyers eventually succeed, they uncomplainingly continue on. In Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus,* the Greek god Sisyphus is condemned to push a stone to the top of a mountain, and at the summit have it roll down for the labour to be repeated once again. The punishment of Sisyphus is eternal, and while the lawyers prevail in their similar task of ascent, descent, and pain, they have overcome merely one elderly official and improved nothing in a court system consisting of limitless rungs of hierarchy, and an innumerable breadth of employees at each level. Similarly, Joseph K. is informed of the acquittal process, in which an "apparent acquittal", his best chance at temporary cessation to his case, is also infinite and indefinite:

> "I'm assuming here that a long time has passed between the apparent acquittal and the new arrest; that's possible, and I know of such cases; but it's equally possible that the acquitted individual leaves the court, returns home, and finds agents already there, waiting to arrest him again...The second acquittal is followed by a third arrest, the third acquittal by a fourth arrest, and so on. That's inherent in the very concept of apparent acquittal." K. was silent. (159)

For Camus, the labour of Sisyphus and of K., is absurd in its futility, a condition that produces anxiety, and parallels the life of the modern man who lives without purpose in a "transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given" (Camus, *Sisyphus* 484).

Sisyphus is the absurd hero for two reasons: he chooses to endure the absurd life, and he endures the absurd life without hope. In the former, K. can be understood as fitting Camus' model of the absurd hero: "The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing" (Camus, *Sisyphus* 492). K. recognizes that the trial that absorbs

his life is absurd – randomly fated, indefinite in length, and frequently unjust – but makes the conscious decision to continue. For both K. and Camus, the alternative upon such revelation of absurdity is suicide. K. rejects suicide in the beginning on Camus' terms: to respond to the absurd by choosing death, the only inevitable aspect of life, is absurd in itself: "Committing suicide would be so irrational that even had he wished to, the irrationality of the act would have prevented him" (11). Condemned to death, "the contrary of suicide" (Camus, *Sisyphus* 480), K. maintains his position as the absurd hero unwilling to perform "his duty to seize the knife as it floated from hand to hand above him and plunge it into himself" (230). Alternatively, while K. persists in his case until his final "verdict" (231), he does so by maintaining hope until the end and therefore relinquishes the title of absurd hero: "If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd" (Camus, *Sisyphus* 491). In approaching new people to aid his trial – his defense lawyer, Titorelli, the priest – K.'s hope is renewed despite having accumulated only the most bleak understanding of the law, his labour, and by extension, life as a whole. While hope of escape, or of meaning is impossible for the existential man, Camus suggests with the acceptance of absurdity comes the hope of transcending the human condition (Camus, *Hope* 153). Because K.'s trial has thus far been understood as the trial of human life, perhaps his hope is not the delusion of reprieve from the incomprehensible system of being, but rather noble hope partnered with knowledge of the tragedy of living: "Earthly hope must be killed; only then can one be saved by true hope" (Kierkegaard, qtd. in Camus, *Hope* 152-3).

The anxiety of the modern age, the alienation of the worker, the angst of the absurd life lived, are reflected in the disorienting atmosphere of Welles's *The Trial*, and doubled through Kafka's surrealist, existentialist examination of modern life using the metaphor of the process. Noir, anxiety, alienation, absurdity, the Kafkaesque and the Wellesian have become synonymous, each growing from a philosophy or form of criticism but expanding to define an age and encompass the dichotomies we experience as individuals:

> These perpetual oscillations between the natural and the extraordinary, the individual and the universal, the tragic and the everyday, the absurd and the logical, are found throughout his work and give it both its resonance and its meaning. These are the paradoxes that must be enumerated, the contradictions that must be strengthened, in order to understand the absurd work (Camus, *Hope* 148).

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