

Article by Larry Hall

The Trial

Did Orson Welles provide inspiration for 'The Prisoner' in his 1962 film of the Kafka novel?

The Prisoner is often referred to as being 'Kafka-esque', which is to say its structure and plotlines resemble those traits evident in the work of novelist Franz Kafka. Virtually unknown during his lifetime, the works of Kafka have since become recognized as symbolising modern man's anxiety-ridden alienation in an unintelligible, hostile, or indifferent world. Kafka's fiction, somewhat like ink-blot tests, elicits and defeats attempts at conclusive explanation.

Two of his best known works are the fragmentary novels *The Trial* (1925), which deals with a man persecuted for a non-specific crime and manipulated by the inscrutable agencies of an unfathomable court of law, and *The Castle* (1926), which describes the relentless but futile efforts of the protagonist to gain recognition from the mysterious authorities ruling, from their castle, the village where he wants to establish himself. Already we can draw some parallels.

Although Patrick McGoochan maintains he has never read Kafka, he was certainly acquainted with the work of Orson Welles, with whom he'd worked on the London stage version of *Moby Dick*, and who is an auteur like McGoochan. Welles' film of Kafka's novel *The Trial* (1962) seems to me a source of inspiration for at least some aspects of *The Prisoner*. True, there's nothing in it about kidnapped secret agents, midget butlers or even marauding balloon creatures - we need to look a little deeper than that - but it doesn't take long to spot, not only some familiar plotlines, but a fair number of graphical set pieces which seem to have direct equivalents in *The Prisoner*.



The Trial is a perfect example of the *film noir* genre, with wonderful use of light and shadow complemented by unusual camera angles and imaginative use of forced perspective.

The Dance Of The Dead episode, among others, makes use of similar techniques (above right) to create a heightened sense of alienation. Time in the film, as in *The Prisoner*, has a dreamlike, surreal quality and is stretched and compressed while events simply dissolve into each other.

As the film opens we're introduced to the concept of 'The Law', which rather like the 'rules' in *Dance Of The Dead*, is as incomprehensible as it is inviolate. Josef K. (played post *Psycho* by Anthony Perkins) awakens to find himself an accused

man. A group of men are there, seemingly able to enter private apartments without needing authorisation, permission or even keys. They inform him he is under arrest but they reveal neither the reason for his accusation, nor the nature of his implied crime. 'Guilty! Read the charge' seems to be the norm here. In fact, Josef K never will find these things out and will spend the rest of his life under surveillance, being interrogated, and trying to escape from a situation not of his choosing.

The action of the film takes place in and around a strange series of buildings, some of which seem to inter-connect; yet their relative positions and internal layouts alter unexpectedly and there is no sense of distance between them. Numbers of people will somehow appear and then disappear as Josef K moves from place to place and the sense of unreality never lets up. Central to the action is the labyrinthine Court House, where every wall seems to be lined with mysterious filing cabinets and every corridor seems to go on forever.



The building is populated by people who are also accused men and women, endlessly waiting to plead their case but unable to breach the complex and inexplicable workings of *The Law*.

One woman has been sitting outside an empty store-room every day for many months simply because someone who seemed to be in authority told her to push her papers under the door and wait. Other people are officials of the court and work in and around the buildings in ambiguous roles. Someone who seems to be a cleaning lady is therefore able to give Josef K learned advice on how to research and build his defence (and seduce him at the same time).

Rather like the Villagers in *The Prisoner*, the accused people are unable to tell who are the accused (the prisoners?), and who are the officials (the warders?) and Josef K is treated as both. The reason for this is exactly the same as in *Checkmate*. Josef K. exudes strength of purpose which the majority interpret as strength of position. He soon discovers however, that potential allies are anything but, and ultimately comes to trust no one except himself, all of which will add up into a very familiar situation for viewers of *The Prisoner*.

Despite being technically under arrest, he is able to move around freely and can continue his work, which seems to be in an enormous office with row upon endless row of desks.



The people there rarely acknowledge him, or each other and they leave their desks en masse when a bell sounds.