In this chapter, I would like to discuss my interpretation of Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* published after his death in 1925 and then adapted in a film by Orson Welles in 1962. *The Trial* has all the characteristics of a dream. The fact that Joseph K. is in bed in the first line of the novel — Welles even shows him sleeping in the film — is a clue that leads us in that direction. Just like a dream, the whole narrative is centered on his person and nothing seems to exist where he is not.

The dream consists of K.’s fantasies and fears that make this dream a nightmare. On the one hand, throughout the plot, K. gives orders and eloquent speeches that express a fantasy for power. In Orson Welles’s film, the character played by Anthony Perkins, does not seem to have the skills to exercise this power; his screen presence is not charismatic. This paradox goes further with his surprising success with women who all fall for him so easily that it seems to be only be allowed through K.’s fantasy. We will find this fantasy again in *The Castle* (1926), Kafka’s text whose main character shares the same name, K.

The text then becomes paranoid as each man becomes a
threat either to himself and his judicial case or to ‘his’ women who are all kidnapped by other men. Welles illustrates a “kidnapping” by a scene where a woman who was just seduced by K. is carried away by a magistrate in a very suggestive position that recalls Giovanni Bologna’s classic sculpture Rape of the Sabine Women (1574).

The paranoia is also enunciated by K. during his audition in the court room, when he denounces a transcendental power persecuting him:

There is no doubt,” he said quietly, “that there is some enormous organization determining what is said by this court. In my case this includes my arrest and the examination taking place here today, an organization that employs policemen who can be bribed, oafish supervisors and judges of whom nothing better can be said than that they are not as arrogant as some others. This organization even maintains a high-level judiciary along with its train of countless servants, scribes, policemen and all the other assistance that it needs, perhaps even executioners and torturers. (Franz Kafka, The Trial, Prague: Schocken, 1999.)

This hypothesis of a transcendence ‘ruling the machine’ is the key question of The Trial. The literal theory of conspiracy is definitely the less interesting hypothesis. However, we can wonder if the bureaucratic system acquired its own transcendence that now escapes from any kind of human control, or if only the almost religious perception of this machine carries this transcendence when its functioning is actually operative only by immanence. Considered more closely, the two hypotheses appear to be the same. Such hypotheses bring us
closer to the interpretation of The Trial as a dream. It is not important whether the transcendence is real or only perceived as such, since the narrative is nothing else than pure perception without depth.

I have just evoked the notion of control, fundamental in the novel as in the movie. Kafka is the inventor of a new type of labyrinth. This invention stands far from the classical and transcendental paradigm of the labyrinth whose author, who looks at it from above, is amused by the confused bodies mistreated by architecture. On the contrary Kafka’s labyrinth celebrates its immanence by including its author, lost, within the labyrinth. Kafka gives us a lot of clues in this direction. First, the name of the character, K., who can be associated with the author. Second, the policemen being punished by the machine they’re serving, and third, the obvious absence of control from anybody over this system. However, Welles goes even further by playing the role of the lawyer himself. By doing so, he is able to create an additional event that celebrates the loss of control of the author over his work. In fact, the film incorporates the scene written by Kafka in which K. dismisses the lawyer from his service provoking the latter’s fury and the desperation of the woman Leni. Since he plays the role of the lawyer, Welles dramatizes this moment of loss of control by representing the actor dismissing the director without ending the film. Transcendence is therefore dismissed, but K. then has to experience the even more frightening power of immanence.

The space of this labyrinth has therefore a fundamental importance and is expressed in a similar way by Kafka and Welles. Spaces are continuous and seem to be included one in another which accentuates the impossibility of an exit. The heterogeneity of architectural styles in the film (modern, neoclassic, gothic…) would seem to diminish the labyrinthine ef-
fect as they create locality; nevertheless, by being contiguous to each other, they maintain the feeling of a unique endless building with no exteriority. Claustrophobia, in this narrative, is not provoked by the smallness of spaces encountered but, rather, by their greatness, which expresses the weight of transcendence. When the transcendence is dissolved in the film, K. has to run away through a narrow corridor of lines that seems to absorb the character while he is chased by a crowd of frightening children whose laughs and screams accentuate the paranoia.

Kafka’s labyrinth is considered one of the hallmark works of Modern Literature for reasons that are partially independent from him. In fact, he never finished *The Trial* and wanted it to be burned after his death. Max Brod, his friend and literary executor, not only decided to save it from fire but had to reassemble the disorganized chapters in an order that was probably not Kafka’s choice. The labyrinth quite literally lost its author, replaced by someone else. This may explain why the last chapter seems so inadequate: that may have been due to Brod, imposing an end while the whole narrative seemed to direct towards its infinity. Only infinity can prolonge the nightmare long enough to be worth of the definition of nightmare.

One could argue that death has to be present in order to tackle the question of freedom. The real freedom, as expressed in *The Trial*, occurs at the same time as the acceptance of the sentence, as we see it in the last chapter of the novel. *The Trial* is a disease that confronts K. to his imminent death and makes him freer than the man — called Block in the novel — whose trial’s procedure (here, the disease) did not even start and who allowed himself to be humiliated by the lawyer. As Block points out in the same scene, “it is often better to be in chains than to be free.” K. confronted this question after he almost fainted in the Court House and a woman, guiding him
to an exit, asked him: “Why don’t you go out? That’s what you wanted!”

Preparing this essay, I thought about the Kubler-Ross model published in 1969 that establishes the five behavioral steps of disease, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, which seem to match the narrative more or less accurately. However, it appears to me as a mistake to insist on this metaphor of the disease against the one of the dream as such a process implies a strict chronology which contradicts by definition the immanent labyrinth I have been presenting so far.

Death has to be thought in a non-chronological way, and the dream allows us to think about it in that way. In fact, death can be characterized by an absolute suspension of time that leads to a perceived infinity of dreams tending to death without ever reaching it. One could then draw curves of time as it is perceived by those who are subjected to it. When living beings would be characterized by a linear curve, dead beings would be characterized by an asymptotic function starting at the moment of their death.

Of course this hypothesis repudiates the last chapter of The Trial as such. In Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature (1975), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari evoke the hypothesis that this chapter was maybe a dream by K. somewhere in the middle of the narrative. Or, as I suggest, if the whole narrative is a dream, this last chapter might be, on the contrary, the only moment of non-dream. In this case, and following the hypothesis of curves of time that I just evoked, this last chapter would in fact be the first one, the one that allows the infinite dream to begin.

......

Originally published on April 17, 2011