

# Heard and Seen

## THE MAGICIANS

Ever since the dawn of cinema there have been magicians. When Lumière resolutely took the path of realism in those first five-minute films, showing us undeniable trains, veritable fire-engines and disasters and humiliations only too recognisably from daily life, Méliés had already chosen, quite as resolutely, to send a man to the moon, to present fairy coaches travelling through sleeping woods, to give us in short marvels instead of documentaries.

Two of the greatest magicians the cinema has ever known have been much in the news of late. Cocteau because in October he astonished us once again, as all those years ago he had done in obedience to Diaghilev's command, dying this time in fact instead of with that hallucinatory backwards fall in *Testament d'Orphée*, when he commented gravely that since poets on occasion gave the impression of dying then their friends might permit themselves the appearance of weeping. And Orson Welles—so long a film-maker and still only middle-aged—because he has attempted perhaps the most impossible task of his never cautious career in bringing Kafka's *Trial* to the screen, which reached London a good six months after it opened in Paris.

Cocteau always insisted that all the work he did, in any medium, was the work of a poet. Certainly none but a poet could have made his films, the first of which he even called *Sang d'un Poète*. Even in films which he did not actually direct himself, such as J.-P. Melville's version of his play, *Les Enfants Terribles*, his influence was as immediately visible as those stars so invariably a part of his signature. Of those he did direct, there are some which more brilliantly exemplify his power to bind an audience in a potent visual spell than others. First, *L'Éternel Retour*, his version of the Tristan story in modern idiom, which reached us after VE day; one will never forget the extraordinary richness—an almost overpowering richness—of the experience after all our years of cinematic austerity. We had been perforce taking it, with the rest of Britain; here was Cocteau simply pushing aside the necessity to take anything and imposing an imperious form on a story already heady enough. The film closed with what has become one of the classic shots of the cinematic archives. The lovers—Jean Marais then at the height of his blond beauty and Madeleine Sologne—lie in state on an upturned boat and the camera tracks back from their becalmed tranquillity to bring us reluctantly to reality as the lights go up inexorably. *La Belle et la Bête* would have delighted Méliés by its invention and visual beauty. The unsophisticated pastoral of Beauty's home changes to the protean tricks of the Beast's palace, where living hands reach out from the walls with torches, or long white curtains billow softly in the evening breeze.

But Cocteau's idiosyncratic personal language has perhaps crystallised for

most of us in the two Orpheus films. The first was made in 1950 and has, I am persuaded, radically and permanently altered our way of looking at things and listening to phrases. This modern re-creation of the Orpheus myth had a coruscating cast, with Maria Casarès as the Princess and François Perier as Heurtebise supporting Jean Marais as Orphée. Dressed in high fashion, riding in a Rolls Royce, the Princess sends off her mindless bodyguard, gauntleted and goggled on their motorcycles, to run down the poet and then tenderly to escort him to the underworld; no one will ever look at motorised police with the same eyes again—even in Sloane Square they seem heavy with menace now. When Heurtebise and Orphée push their way through the viscous surface of the mirrors which, we have already been reminded, would do better to reflect more deeply, they find themselves in an underworld at once bomb-site and wasteland which strikes one with a horrid familiarity. Each time one sees this film, it means more, and coupled with its successor, *Testament d'Orphée* it can transform the visible world.

A good deal of the *Testament* was shot in Les Baux, at the best of times not a reassuring place and never less so than when horse-headed men are to be met at any corner. It is an allegory of the life and death of a poet, and when Cocteau meets himself unsmilingly in the arcades of Villefranche, or dies with wide staring eyes, or turns a flower from life to death and back again (like Orphée earlier) we saw images which really only make sense now that the man himself has died in truth. What the master-magician has left us in his testament is a legacy of delight to the eye and stimulus to the mind for which we must be ever grateful.

Orson Welles never tried to astonish anyone: it simply came naturally to him from the day when, at sixteen, he walked into a Dublin theatre and demanded a job on very insufficient experience—and got it. *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* made as radical an alteration of our ways of looking at the screen in relation to life as did *Orphée* in its very different fashion. The minor as well as the major works of Welles have, on the continent especially, become required viewing for anyone interested in the cinema. He has had some notable failures in his time, but all through his crowded career, punctuated with performances in other men's pictures in order to earn money to make his own (remember his Harry Lime in *The Third Man*?) he has never given a boring performance or made an uninteresting film. Bad they might be, but one was never left indifferent.

By his version of *The Trial* I found myself overwhelmed; it may not be true to the book, it may well be too self-indulgent, it may be grossly exaggerated but the fact remains that one spectator, at least, reeled out of the cinema speechless from the impact of image and sound. I seem to be in a very small minority here, so it appears all the more important to record the fact. Welles has, very mistakenly in my opinion, brought Kafka up to date plotwise as well as visually, so that K is blown up and not killed by the knife, and the subsequent explosion leaves us with That Cloud on the screen again. But most of the other innova-

## BLACKFRIARS

tions are to the good; the bank, for instance, changed into a monstrous stretch of office not all that different from the one in *The Apartment*, and the decor an unnerving alternation between modern gigantism and pre-war decay. Welles had the brilliant idea of utilising the vast dilapidated vistas of the abandoned Gare d'Orsay for many of the sets, and the effect is shattering. The visibly disintegrating architecture echoes in a most sinister way the disintegration of security that progresses around Anthony Perkins as K; and the way in which spatial reality is destroyed, even in the modern buildings, by giving the impression that all ceilings are too low is physically oppressive.

This is a magician's piece all right: nothing is what it seems and you open a door in an efficient office to find a torture chamber in which the victim himself is taping his mouth lest his screams should irk anyone. The sordid and the magnificent jostle each other uncomfortably, and you step straight from the familiar to the impossible with a jolt as relentless as the lack of logic in the things that happen to K on his way to the execution he never understands but always expected. Close-ups of knowing faces are striped with zebra shadows, long shots of K hustled across de Chirico perspectives of hostile wasteland, narrow catwalks or wide marble staircases lead you almost inevitably to the bedroom of the Advocate where Orson Welles lies in a baroque bed doing nothing and yet giving the impression of being one of the monsters out of *The Faerie Queen*. All this may be too much, but only an arch-sorcerer could have conjured it up in quite this way. If you are interested in what the cinema can convey strictly in its own terms, then do not miss *The Trial*. You may hate every moment but it will not be money wasted.

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