

Jan Švankmajer

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JAN ŠVANKMAJER: THE PRODIGIOUS ANIMATOR FROM PRAGUE

The Czech animated-film director, visual artist, and surrealist Jan Švankmajer is one of the most remarkable filmmakers of the last three decades. The influential French film journal *Positif* considers him, together with the famous Russian animator Yuri Norstein (*Tale of Tales*), "a giant of contemporary film."⁽¹⁾ The British film critic Julian Petley calls him, along with the Polish directors Jan Lenica and Walerian Borowczyk, "...one of the key animators to have emerged in Eastern Europe since the war."⁽²⁾ Born in 1934, the sixty-years-old director embarked on his filmmaking career in 1964; since then, he has made more than twenty films, mostly shorts.⁽³⁾ His works are regularly featured at major international competitions, including Annecy, Berlin, Cannes, Mannheim, Toronto, and Oberhausen.⁽⁴⁾ For his films, Švankmajer has received over thirty festival prizes and honours.

Unfortunately, Švankmajer's philosophically profound, visually rich and stylistically innovative work is little known beyond the relatively narrow circle of well-informed or specialized audience. In his native Czech Republic, the distribution of most of his films was suspended shortly after the 1968 Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia⁽⁵⁾ and for the rest of the 1968-1989 period, it was severely restricted; Švankmajer's bizarre, often grotesque style and his surrealist perspective were politically undesirable in the post-invasion atmosphere of cultural repression.

Although the director was never officially banned in his country, his opportunities to shoot in Czech studios (all of them state-run and state-controlled) were minimal and consequently, he worked with considerable difficulties;⁽⁶⁾ several of his scripts could not be realized.⁽⁷⁾ As well, little if any critical writing on his work was published in Czechoslovakia between 1971-1989.⁽⁸⁾ For example, in one of the rare references to his work, the Czech national film monthly *Film a doba* (October 1988) granted the filmmaker a total of 33 words.⁽⁹⁾

Curiously, the outside world treated Švankmajer with equal oblivion. Only after repeated triumphs in the international festival circuit, especially after 1983 when he was awarded several major prizes for his *Possibilities of a Dialogue* (1982), did some doors open for the filmmaker in Great Britain, France, and other European countries.⁽¹⁰⁾ His films were exhibited, and occasionally shown on television; a documentary on the artist was produced in Great Britain in 1984.⁽¹¹⁾

Despite Švankmajer's West European successes, his work remains practically unknown in North America. Even to well informed film audiences and most professional film historians and critics, Švankmajer's name means little. Only his animation-live action feature *Alice* (1988), found its way onto the screens of a few large American and Canadian cities.⁽¹²⁾ This was, however, a hesitant release. In Toronto, for example, the film was shown only a few times; the newspaper advertisements offered no useful references indicating the nature of this work or information about its author and his work. As could be expected after such neglect, the film did not do well at the box office and quickly disappeared from the theatres.⁽¹³⁾ Švankmajer's other shorts have not been distributed in North America at all, neither theatrically nor by the television networks, including the American PBS, Canadian CBC, and the non-commercial TV Ontario. Indeed, the restricted marketing of Švankmajer's films in the West has been very similar to their ostracism by the Czechoslovak Communist authorities, however different the reasons for it may have been.

Such coincidence should not surprise. Švankmajer is an artist who never conformed to stylistic nor political fashions. His films do not placate but question, examine, and provoke; often, they conjure haunting images of a bewildering, absurd and violent universe.

The artist addresses his viewers mainly through the aesthetic impact of his images -- their composition, colour, shapes, texture and naturally, their contextuality. The narrative component in Švankmajer's works (if present at all) is usually subordinated to their visual element. For example, dialogue is absent in most of his films; among the few exceptions are *Alice* and *The Garden* (1968). Also, his use of accompanying

music is unconventional, with frequent counterpoints. In more ways than one, it differs from the illustrative, dramatizing melodies of the traditional Disney-type cartoon. Švankmajer has always had close aesthetic ties with visual arts. Before he embarked upon a filmmaker's career, the artist mostly devoted himself to drawings, collages and the creation of a variety of *objets d'art* (1958-1964).

The range of Švankmajer's film techniques is wide. He uses object animation and live action; his preferred approach is the combination of these two techniques. "I don't like the cartoon and I prefer to place my imaginary world into reality," says the director.⁽¹⁴⁾ Švankmajer often assembles clipped drawings into a collage (including film clips).⁽¹⁵⁾ One can say, he would animate almost anything: man-made objects, live and stuffed animals, plants, insects, bones, tools, all kinds of refuse, a variety of found objects, and others. Sometimes, he constructs almost the entire film in live action and complements it with a few short moments of animation. For instance, the animated "crawling potatoes" in his live-action picture *Down to the Cellar* (1983) endow this almost documentary-like short with a bizarre surreal twist.⁽¹⁶⁾ In *Leonardo's Diary* (1972), *Alice, Apartment* (1968), and other films, an equally effective combination of animation with live action is used.

Švankmajer invariably approaches animation in a non-traditional way, preferring innovative three-dimensional techniques. Such is the case in *Possibilities of a Dialogue*.⁽¹⁷⁾ In the first of this film's three episodes (or "dialogues"), the director transforms some of the most mundane and utilitarian manufactured objects and food items, including rulers, compasses, cutlery, paper, pencils, fruits and vegetables, into bizarre agents of metaphorical destruction.⁽¹⁸⁾ In the second "Dialogue," he animates unbaked sculpting clay (formed into male and female upper torsos), achieving a stunningly realistic effect.⁽¹⁹⁾

One artistic domain is of special importance to Švankmajer: It is the puppet, the doll, the figurine, the primitive automaton. These are toys and other mechanical contraptions of the pre-industrial era which were not yet mass-produced; each of them is to a great degree a product of individual imagination and skill, indeed an *objet d'art*. The filmmaker is equally fascinated by the crude mechanical devices of the fairgrounds and mountebanks with their straightforward naiveté, and by the natural materials from which these gadgets were manufactured, especially wood.

Švankmajer is evidently extending the fertile traditions of Czech folk puppetry of the past two centuries.⁽²⁰⁾ He is also continuing the renowned legacy of the Czech puppet-film and experimental animation brought to mastery by Karel Zeman (*The Fabulous Baron Munchhausen*), and Jiří Trnka (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Hand*). Yet Švankmajer's definition of the film puppet is considerably broader than Zeman's or Trnka; unlike the traditionally poetic-lyrical approach of the two above-mentioned artists, this director often explores the bizarre, the dark and the absurd.

Švankmajer also expands the range of combinatory techniques (live action and animation) that connect him with Trnka and Zeman. Already in his early short *The Last Trick of Mr. Schwarcewalld and Mr. Edgar* (1964), the two main figurine-like characters are in fact live actors wearing large wooden masks covering their heads and shoulders; in *The Coffin Shop* (1966), hand-puppets share the stage with a live guinea-pig;⁽²¹⁾ in *Don Juan* (1970), live actors are fitted with strings and special harnesses and trained to move mechanically so as to simulate life-size marionettes. And in *Alice*, the "live" little heroine inhabits a fantastic world of animated images.

Many of these techniques help to create a world of ambiguity, closing the gap between living creatures and inanimate objects. While people are often made to act like robots, the inanimate objects show a considerable degree of anthropomorphism. They get into mischief, fights, often savagery, including decapitation, infanticide, suicide, and cannibalism. One of the most subtle yet haunting scenes in this respect is the "jackknife table-dance" in *Jabberwocky* (1971). At the beginning it looks like an animated variation of the famous "oceana-roll dance" in Chaplin's *Gold Rush* -- but its haunting conclusion is unmistakably Švankmajer: The jackknife, jumping and twisting on a table covered with a white laced tablecloth suddenly stops its dance and falls flat, its switch-blade vehemently closing with an audible snap; a dark red trickle slowly pours out of the knife's "body." In another scene of the same film, a little "happy family" of innocent-looking children's dolls cutely dine at a small toy-table -- their meal consists of other cute dolls, who, have just been crushed in a (real) meat grinder.



Figure 1: *Dimensions of Dialogue* (dir. Jan Švankmajer, 1982)

The selection of objects and image composition are complemented by Švankmajer's considerable editorial imagination and skill. He often manipulates streams of images through rapidmontage, such as in *Historia Naturae* (1967), *Leonardo's Diary*, *Quiet Week in a House* (1969) and in other shorts, offering amazing and original associations, a kind of *kinetic collage*. Images are often combined with music, resulting in a sophisticated form of rhythmical montage. Švankmajer often uses an unusual montage technique which may well be considered his signature -- the use of big close-ups unexpectedly juxtaposed with the main action.

One of the most effective examples of this powerful technique can be found in the live-action absurdist short *The Garden*. In this film, the viewer is repeatedly assailed by disturbing big close-ups such as a detail of one of the two main character's Adam's apples. These images cause their otherwise innocuous conversation to appear mysterious and disquieting.⁽²²⁾

Much about Švankmajer's aesthetics and philosophy can be explained by pointing to his adherence to surrealism. He has been an active member of the Prague Surrealist group since 1963. During the 1970s, he produced a series of collage art including *tactile experimentations* through which he examines links between the senses, specifically between sight and touch.⁽²³⁾ And, in the late 1980s, he edited an impressive surrealist anthology entitled *Open Game (Otevřená hra)* which appeared in the then Communist Czechoslovakia as an underground *Samizdat* publication.⁽²⁴⁾

Švankmajer's surrealist orientation is an essential element in almost all his films. He draws from sources dear to many surrealists including Edgar A. Poe, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Lewis Carroll, Horace Walpole, Luis Buñuel, and Federico Fellini.⁽²⁵⁾ His symbolism and visual structures are also linked to surrealist imagery, particularly those used in the films *The Apartment*, *Jabberwocky*, and *Alice*. This includes some typical surrealist details like Buñuelesque insects. In the *Last Trick...*, for example, a beetle repeatedly crawls out of the heads of the main characters.⁽²⁶⁾

Another significant source of Švankmajer's inspiration, (also tied to surrealism), has been the work of Franz Kafka. Says Švankmajer: "In our civilization, the dream, that natural wellspring of the imagination, is constantly blocked, and in its place we find absurdity which grants precedence to our 'scientific, rational system.'"⁽²⁷⁾ References to Kafkaesque absurdity abound in the *Garden*, produced in 1968, a fateful year for all Czechs and Slovaks.⁽²⁸⁾ The film's narrative is constructed around a subtle confrontation between two male characters. One of them is evidently a Novotný-era conformist who managed to build for himself a comfortable life in an agreeable country home.⁽²⁹⁾ The other man is apparently an old friend who did not do so well. Švankmajer reveals the manipulative nature as well as social status of the former in a most original

way: The fence around his home and spacious garden is made of a human chain -- they stand there holding hands, quietly obeying their master's orders.⁽³⁰⁾

In *The Apartment*, a series of absurd incidents follow one another (water rushes out of the stove, a chair collapses under the hapless hero, a hard-boiled egg breaks any object which is normally used to crack it, etc.) These unexpected events prevent the young man from enjoying his apartment in the usual way. It is in the conclusion of this film that Švankmajer offers another absurdist metaphor, and a direct homage to Kafka. After opening a window and finding behind it only a solid brick wall with scratched-on inscriptions and graffiti, the disillusioned and desperate hero adds his name: "Josef K."⁽³¹⁾

Švankmajer's manifest concern for the human condition and the questions of culture, his black humour and understanding of life's absurdities reflect the historical experience of his own country and that of Central Europe. Through his work, now stretching over three decades, Švankmajer has strived to expand the traditional definition of the animated film, beyond the limited concept of the Disney cartoon aesthetics. Without doubt he has succeeded, both philosophically, and through new stylistic and formal advances.



Figure 2: Švankmajer directing *Don Juan* (1970)

Notes

1. Editorial introduction to "Dossier Animation 1," *Positif* 345, p.36.
2. Julian Petley, *Monthly Film Bulletin* 53, No. 629, p. 188.
3. The length of Švankmajer's shorts is usually 10-15 minutes; there are very few exceptions.
4. In 1985, the festival in Annecy (JICA) organized a Švankmajer retrospective. For this occasion, it also published a brochure edited by the Swiss surrealist Gilles Dunant, *Jan Švankmajer l'animateur* (Geneva, 1985).
5. After the 1989 "velvet revolution," all bans on films were lifted.
6. For example, the script for *Down to the Cellar* was rejected by the Prague Krátký film Studios; following a considerable struggle, the Bratislava Short Film Studios accepted the project. After its completion, the Czechoslovak authorities refused the initial request from the Oberhausen Festival organisers, to enter the film into competition, but they reluctantly gave up. *Down to the Cellar* won the Prize of the Critique.
7. Projects entitled *Bleděmodrovous* (*Palebluebeard*), *Hmyz* (*Insects*), *Nikde Nikdo* (*Nobody Nowhere*) belong

to this category.

8. Some information on Švankmajer is also missing from issues of the *Filmový přehled*, a publication of the Czechoslovak Film Institute.
9. Veronika Kratochvílová, "Vytvarníci animované tvorby," *Film a doba* 34, (October 1988), 597.
10. This film was awarded Grand Prix, and Prix FIPRESCI at the prestigious festival in Annecy, the Golden Bear and Jury Award in the short film category at the Berlin Film Festival, Prize for Direction at Mannheim, and festival prizes in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia.
11. The 14-minute film called *The Cabinet of Jan Švankmajer -- Prague's Alchemist of Film* was directed by the Quay brothers and Keith Griffiths. Both Griffiths and the Quay deserve special credit for informing audiences about Švankmajer's films. Griffiths' London-based production company Koninck participated in other Švankmajer projects, such as the production of *Alice*.
12. It is very probable that the commercial release of this film was helped by the reputation of its literary model by Lewis Carroll.
13. Together with most Švankmajer's films, it is now available on DVD.
14. Michel Ciment and Lorenzo Codelli, "Entretien avec Jan Švankmajer," *Positif* No. 345, p.45.
15. The influence of Jiří Kolář on some of his earlier films, such as *Punch and Judy/The Coffin Shop* (1966) and *Leonardo's Diary* (1972), is indisputable.
16. This film reveals the influence of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*; it is without doubt a prototype of *Alice*.
17. Traditional cartoon animation (the Disney school, for example) prefers drawings.
18. This episode also illustrates Švankmajer's affinity to the Mannerists, particularly to the flamboyant style of Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the 16th-century painter of the Emperor Rudolph II's cosmopolitan Prague. One of Švankmajer's earlier films, the *Historia Naturae*, was dedicated to Rudolph II.
19. The animator Vlasta Pospíšilová also deserves credit for her creative contribution.
20. Švankmajer studied puppetry at the AMU in Prague between 1954-1958. He also worked with the *Semafor* theatre, the *Činoherní klub*, and the famous *Laterna Magika*.
21. Often, Švankmajer includes a number of distancing techniques pointing to the medium; in *The Coffin Shop*, for example, the viewer sees the hands that operate the two puppets.
22. Only few directors use this technique. One of them is the Polish-born filmmaker Walerian Borowczyk who employed it in his film *Blanche* (1971).
23. Švankmajer regularly exhibits his artworks, often with his wife Eva Švankmajerová, a gifted surrealist painter. Similarly, his wife participates in his filmmaking; for example, she painted the playing cards and created the yellow book for his *Alice*.
24. The leading personality of the Surrealist group was, until 1986, Vratislav Effenberger (1923-1986); other members include Karol Baron, František Dryje, Jiří Koubek, Albert Marenčín, Emila Medková, Alena Nádvorníková, Martin Stejskal and Ludvík Šváb. The anthology, professionally printed and bound, was published clandestinely as a paperback of 210 pages with 89 monochrome illustrations. The print run was 100 copies.
25. He was inspired by Poe in his *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Pit and the Pendulum*; by Carroll in his *Jabberwocky*, *Alice*, and *Down to the Cellar*.
26. In the classic of surrealist cinema, *Un Chien Andalou*, made by Buñuel and Dalí (1928), a swarm of ants

crawls out of the palm of a hand of a male character.

27. In Amos Vogel, "Hallo Berlin," *Film Comment* 24, No 3, May-June 1988, p. 63.

28. On April 20, five Soviet-led Warsaw Pact countries invaded Czechoslovakia, ending the short-lived liberal "Prague Spring" of the Alexander Dubček Government.

29. Antonín Novotný was the Communist President of Czechoslovakia of the pre-1968 era.

30. The two main characters from Švankmajer's *The Garden*, their mutual relationship, their social position and behaviour, in more ways than one foreshadow the characters in Václav Havel's Vaněk one-act plays.

31. A window hiding a solid wall behind it, appeared also in Pavel Juráček's acclaimed short *Joseph Kilián* (1963).

References

Filmography

1964

Poslední trik pana Schwarcewallda a pana Edgara (*The Last Trick of Mr. Schwarcewalld and Mr. Edgar*); 10:45 min; live action with animation. Awards: Diplôme spécial, Bergamo 1964; Filmdukaten, Mannheim 1964; Prix de la première oeuvre, Tours, 1964; Premio Dirección General de la Cultura, Buenos Aires, 1964.

1965

Johann Sebastian Bach: Fantasia g-moll; 8 min; animated with live action. Awards: Oesterreichischer Kulturfilmpreis, 1966.

1966

Rakvičkárna (*Punch and Judy*); 10 min; puppets with animation and live action. Awards: Filmdukaten Mannheim, 1966; Josef von Sternberg Preis, Mannheim, 1968.

Et cetera; 8 min; animated. Awards: Grand Prize, Short Film Festival, Karlovy Vary (CZ), 1967; Hauptpreis, Oberhausen, 1967; Trilobit 1967 (Prize of CSFU).

1967

Historia naturae (suíta); 9 min; animated. Awards: Main Prize, Experimental film category, Kroměříž (CZ), 1967; Max Ernst Prize, Oberhausen, 1968.

1968

Zahrada (*The Garden*); 19 min; live action. Awards: Lion of St. Marco, Venice Short Film Festival, 1968.

Byt (*The Flat/The Apartment*); 13 min. Live action with animation. Awards: Grand Prize, Oberhausen, 1969. Grand Prize, Ars-Film Kroměříž (CZ), 1968. Trilobit (Prize of CSFU), 1968.

Picknick mit Weissmann (*A Picnic with Weissmann*); 13 min. Animated cartoon.

1969

Tichý týden v domě (*A Quiet Week in the House*); 13 min. Live action with animation. Awards: Prize in Oberhausen, 1971. Prize for Best Experimental Film, Tampere, Finland, 1971.

1970

Don Šajn (*Don Juan*); 30 min. Live action. Awards: Grand Prize, ARS-Film, Kroměříž (CZ), 1970. Prize of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Culture.

Kostnice (*The Ossuary*); 10 min. A documentary. This film exists in two versions: 1. With the commentary of the Sedlec Ossuary Guide. 2. With a musical soundtrack and the poem by Jacques Prévert, "Comment dessiner le portrait d'un oiseau."

1971

Jabberwocky; 14 min. Live action with animation. Awards: Grand Prize in Animated Film category, Oberhausen, 1974. Silver Phoenix, Atlanta, 1974.

1972

Leonardův deník (Leonardo's Diary); 10 min.

1977

Otrantský zámek (The Castle of Otranto); 15 min.

1981

Zánik domu Usherů (The Fall of the House of Ushers); 15 min. Live photography with animation. Awards: Golden Dragon, Short Film Festival, Cracow, 1982. Prize FICC. Prize of the Public, Festival of Fantasy Films, Porto, 1982.

1982

Možnosti dialogu (Possibilities of a Dialogue/Dimensions of a Dialogue 1983. Main Prize, Short Film category, Sydney 1983.); 12 min. Animated (3-D animation). Awards: Golden Bear, Short Film Category, Berlin FF, 1983. Jury Award, Short Film Category, Berlin FF, 1983. Grand Prix, Annecy 1983. Prix FIPRESCI, Annecy 1983. Prize for Direction, Melbourne 1983. Prize for Animated Film, Melbourne 1983. P. Stuyvesant Prize, Melbourne

1983

Do pivnice (Do sklepa/Down to the Cellar); 15 min. Live action with animation. Awards: Critique Award, Oberhausen, 1983.

Kyvadlo, jáma a naděje (The Pendulum, the Pit and Hope); 15 min.

1987

Alice; 86 min. Live action with animation. Awards: Best Film (Animated Feature Category), Annecy.

1988

Mužné hry (Virile Games); 17 min. Live action with animation.

1989

Tma světlo tma (Darkness, Light, Darkness); 7 min.

1990

Smrt stalinismu v Cechách (The Death of Stalinism in Bohemia); 10 min.

1992

Jídlo (Food); 14 min.

1994

Faust; Animation with live action. Starring Petr Čepek. 92 min.

1996

Conspirators of Pleasure (Spiklenci slasti) UK/Germany/Switzerland/Czech Republic, colour, 85 min. Live action with animation.

2000

Greedy Guts (aka Little Otik; Otesánek) Czech Republic/Great Britain/Japan, colour 127 min. Live action with animation.

Unrealized scripts:

Bleděmodrovous (Palebluebeard)

Hmyz (Insects)

Nikde nikdo (Nobody Nowhere)

Útěk z deprese (The Flight from Depression)

The unrealized works were conceived mostly between 1970-1978. Švankmajer wrote a number of other manuscripts.

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