

Jan Švankmajer: Film as Puppet Theatre by James Edward Frost

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My understanding of the Czech filmmaker Jan Švankmajer (b.1934) comes from the perspective of puppetry. Švankmajer’s surreal and grotesque films, which I saw in my late teens, were a primary influence on my career as a puppet maker and performer. Early in my career I visited Prague, the puppet-capital of Europe where Švankmajer is based, and returned with a finely crafted traditional marionette to use as a technical model for my own creations. Though I was always interested in animation and have dabbled as an amateur, I preferred the immediacy of live outdoor performance. For Švankmajer the movement was in the opposite direction.

A key influence on Švankmajer’s work as a filmmaker was his early career as a puppeteer. Before his first short film of 1964 Švankmajer directed the company *Theatre of Masks*, firstly at *Semafor Theatre* in Prague, then with the experimental multimedia company *Laterna Magika* (still active today). Along with his fascination for traditional folk puppetry “with their wonderful diction and spontaneous humour,” Švankmajer utilised ‘black theatre’ and ‘black light’ techniques.¹

In ‘black theatre’ the manipulator is set back from the “corridor of light” illuminating the puppets, concealed entirely in black against a black backdrop.² For the audience this involves some awareness of the presence of the unseen puppeteer, whose body is discerned occasionally as a shifting shape in the black void behind the main action. Sometimes the puppeteer’s gloved hands become disembodied protagonists interacting with objects and puppets. In ‘black light’ the objects and puppets are luminescent.

Early *Laterna Magika* performances used black theatre and combined puppetry with live actors, dancers, slide and film projection. Their appearance in 1958 was a forerunner of much multimedia theatrical spectacle today. Their use of puppets, full size puppet costumes and stop motion projection can still be seen in their kaleidoscopic dance extravaganza *Wonderful Circus (Kouzelný Cirkus)*, which has been running since 1977.

Alfréd Radok launched *Laterna Magika* at the Brussels World Fair, ‘Expo 58’. By the time Švankmajer joined the company Radok had left, but his brother Emil became an important early mentor and collaborator. Švankmajer was hired as a graduate assistant on Emil Radok’s puppet film, *Johanes Doktor Faust* (1958), which begins with black theatre and a playful use of the puppeteers’ isolated hands. Though the film is based on live performance, the editing is powerful in its rhythm and abruptness, owing

¹ Peter Hames, “Interview with Jan Švankmajer,” in *Dark Alchemy: The Films of Jan Švankmajer* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1995), 96-118.

² Eileen Blumental, *Puppets and Puppetry: an illustrated world survey* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 68.

something to Sergei Eisenstein's 'dialectical montage'.³ There is some use of cinematic trickery, such as dissolves and superimposition in the dream sequence, and stop motion animation of toy 'jumping jacks'.

In 1964, six years since Radok's film, Švankmajer turned from puppetry to directing his own film. Švankmajer's first film *The Last Trick (Poslední trik pana Schwarcewalldea a pana Edgara, 1964)* used black theatre with a similar pace to Radok's film. Like the *Laterna Magika* shows, it used live actors and mask to create a theatrical automaton-puppet. The cinematically animated elements are few, but important, such as the painted eyelids of the huge papier mache heads. In all his work Švankmajer is selective about when and why he introduces animation. Some films are entirely animated, such as the celebrated *Dimensions of Dialogue (Možnosti dialogu, 1982)*, whereas some have no animation at all. Often animation is integrated with live action and used sparingly to disrupt the sense of realism: "...I use real animation for mystification, for disturbing the utilitarian habits of the audience, to unsettle them, or for subversive purposes."⁴ In *The Last Trick* the gesture of the real actors shaking hands is pixilated to produce a mechanised exaggeration - an impression further emphasised when they destroy each other to the sound of a scratched record.

There are some significant differences between live and filmed puppetry. A live performance is present for the audience in a unique temporal way: it inhabits the space of the audience and sometimes interacts with them. In the ghostly realm of the cinema, puppetry does not have the same ontological ground that it does in performance. The puppet itself is a simulacrum of a living being: in cinema it exists within an entirely simulated reality where even the actors are not 'live'. So in a sense the whole of cinema is a kind of puppetry; it is a world that can be fully manipulated. However, Švankmajer's stated reason for the shift from performance to film was pragmatic: "Film has one great advantage over theatre. It can wait for its audience."⁵ The theatre audience of his time were not necessarily ready for his avant garde experiments. But although his films were often shelved or banned by the censors, he did not seem overly worried by this. Instead he felt that they would eventually find their audience, whereas in live performance the audience could be easily driven away for good.

We should remember that puppetry is a form of animation and that any object has the potential to become a puppet through manipulation. Puppetry is instantaneous 'live animation' as opposed to the often painstaking, labour-intensive process of stop motion. Though manipulated, the stop motion puppet cannot be operated in real time (unlike some CGI techniques). Stop motion figures are tangible, like other puppets, but their movement is illusory. As Steve Tillis put it "...their visible movement is not being reproduced at all, but produced for the first time through the medium of film."⁶ The puppet therefore becomes a bridge between the tangible world of things and the illusory world of film: between live movement and the mechanical simulation of movement.

³ Švankmajer acknowledges early interest in the films of Eisenstein and Vertov as a student, see Hames, "Interview with Jan Švankmajer," 96.

⁴ Hames, "Interview with Jan Švankmajer," 112.

⁵ Hames, "Interview with Jan Švankmajer," 99.

⁶ Steve Tillis, "The Art of Puppetry in the Age of Media Production," in *Puppets, Masks and Performing Objects*, ed. John Bell (Cambridge, MASS. and London: MIT Press, 2001), 181.

In live puppetry the operators are often visible, their deftness part of the spectacle. In Švankmajer's second feature film *Faust* (*Lekce Faust*, 1994) the hands of the operators are seen, as they often are in traditional Czech puppet theatre. As Eileen Blumental said "...lack of believability amplifies the theatrical kick."⁷ In cinematic animation the manipulator is hidden in the process, but Švankmajer challenges this. In *Faust*, and early films like *The Last Trick*, the manipulator, actor and puppet are merged into one being. In contrasting the fluid movements of live film with the jerky mechanical appearance of stop motion Švankmajer is disrupting the illusion of film; showing the artifice of the mechanical process whilst uniting the real with the impossible.

The traditional puppet show of Faust was especially close to Švankmajer. It has been part of the Czech repertoire since before the Elizabethan play of Christopher Marlowe. In 1962 Švankmajer staged a mask version with his theatre company. The theme of a demonic summoning and shady deal with the devil was also echoed in the short *Don Juan* (*Don Šajn*, 1969). But it had broader themes which touched upon other aspects of life such as politics and psychology; "...I felt a great urge to bring my own obsessive theme into the work [*Faust*]: the theme of manipulation. Manipulation is not just a principle of totalitarian regimes. Of this I am becoming more and more convinced."⁸ In creating the "manipulated reality" in the film *Faust*, in which modern-day Prague was intercut and intersected with theatrical sets, Švankmajer made extensive use of traditional Czech marionettes. As they are directly manipulated by strings, marionettes are the supreme metaphor for other kinds of manipulation "...puppets best symbolise the character of man in a contemporary, manipulated world."⁹

Archaic-looking marionettes also appear in Švankmajer's first feature-length *Alice* (*Něco z Alenky*, 1988) and also the short *Punch and Judy* (*Rakvičkárna*, 1966) which utilised hand puppets. Along with their metaphorical power Švankmajer was also drawn to their latent meaning as objects; the impact of time and touch, and the emotional attachments we have to them. The puppets, even if only replicated in his films, are chipped and battered having apparently undergone heavy handling in performance. Many objects in his films are from his own extensive and bizarre personal collection, exhibiting his "...weakness for the decayed genres of folk art: puppets and the scenery of folk puppeteers, old toys, shooting ranges, mechanical fairground targets..."¹⁰ Thus, what is defunct and abandoned is given new life and new meaning. For Švankmajer, puppets signify 'certainty' in relation to the world. This is partly to do with their historical life or historicity.¹¹ They are a refuge as well as being a symbol.

In *Faust* (and also *Don Juan*) the full-size puppets are shown hanging lifeless in the wings of the theatre: Faust kicks them to test their reflexes but gets no reaction from them. Outside the performance itself the puppet is, in Roman Paska's writing, a "dead

⁷ Blumental, *Puppets and Puppetry: an illustrated world survey*, 71.

⁸ Hames, "Interview with Jan Švankmajer," 114.

⁹ Hames, "Interview with Jan Švankmajer," 107.

¹⁰ Hames, "Interview with Jan Švankmajer," 111.

¹¹ Hames, "Interview with Jan Švankmajer," 107.

thing, a potential signifier only.”¹² As an object the puppet is reborn for each performance, rather than having the illusion of continuous character. The ‘dead thing’ of the puppet is contrasted with the continuous living presence of the actor and deliberately confused when, in one memorable scene, the actor breaks out of the puppet shell. This contrast between the living and the lifeless is seen elsewhere in Švankmajer’s films: the beetle which crawls inside and around the papier mache heads in *The Last Trick*; the live guinea pig which Punch and Joey the clown squabble over in *Punch and Judy*; the cat which disrupts the game in *Jabberwocky* (*Žvahlav aneb šatičky slaměného Huberta*, 1971).

As well as puppets Švankmajer often animated antique dolls and other toys, most notably in *Jabberwocky*, *Alice* and *Surviving Life* (*Přežít svůj život*, 2010). On the one hand this echoes the surrealists’ interest in childhood; on the other the doll is closely related to the puppet.

In the 19th century Charles Baudelaire observed how children will animate any object, but also felt that looking for the ‘soul’ in the toy “is the first metaphysical stirring.”¹³ Rainer Maria Rilke further developed his suggestions. Children make an emotional investment in dolls and thus breath life into them. But behind the mask face of the doll there is nobody there. The doll is a silent vessel, which we fill with our own incomprehension of being; “We mixed in the doll, as if in a test-tube, everything we were experiencing and could not recognize.”¹⁴ More recently Roman Paska talked about the puppet as hiding nothingness, unlike the mask, which hides a living being.

Tillis coined the term “media figure” to encompass characters created by stop motion, cell animation or CGI; “Media figures share with puppetry the crucial trait of presenting characters through a site of signification other than actual living beings.”¹⁵ They become signifiers for something outside of themselves, and what lies outside themselves is this notion of self. Thus the doll, puppet, effigy, or ‘media figure’ is a signifier for an “other self”: it is empty of soul but when we animate it with movement we fill it with meaning.

In some films Švankmajer’s traditional puppets are given independent life using stop motion. In *Faust* the giant angel and devil heads roll through a wooded landscape; the miniature devils batter and abuse the angels independent of their operators. However, Švankmajer makes no attempt to animate the facial expressions. The expressions remain blank, the gaze fixed. The ‘doll-soul’ is made manifest in his films; it eats and drinks (*Jabberwocky*) and defecates (*Faust*); it experiences the world for itself, but its expression remains blank to remind us that it is still just an empty vessel after all.

In live performance under high-contrast lighting the expression on a fixed puppet face will appear to change. One’s eyes can be tricked when apprehending a moving three-dimensional object. The audience will interpret the puppet face just as they interpret a

¹² Roman Paska, “Notes on Puppet Primitives and the Future of an Illusion,” in *Puppetry: A Reader in Theatre Practice*, ed. Penny Francis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 138.

¹³ Charles Baudelaire, “The Philosophy of Toys,” trans. Paul Keegan, in *Essays on Dolls*, ed. Idries Parry (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 24.

¹⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, “Dolls: On the Wax Dolls of Lotte Pritzel,” trans. Idries Parry, in *Essays on Dolls*, ed. Idries Parry (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 31.

¹⁵ Tillis, “The Art of Puppetry in the Age of Media Production,” 175.

living being. In film animation the trickery is not in the eyes of the beholder but in the creation of the work itself. In film there is no such ambiguity of interpretation, the audience has only one viewpoint and the fixed expression remains fixed. It can also be replayed to counteract one's momentary doubts of perception.

We can look back to Weimar cinema for an antecedent Švankmajer's expressionless puppet faces. Paul Wegener's *Der Golem* (1920) is set in the Jewish ghetto of an imagined medieval Prague. In a pivotal scene, the Kabbalist Rabbi Löw uses the dark arts to summon the demon Astaroth. Astaroth appears as an isolated carved mask, moved using black theatre. The mask stares blankly with a fixed expression, smoke issuing from its mouth as it slowly turns toward the camera. But rather than tricking the eye the demon appears as a mere façade, as an empty theatre trick.

Wegener's film took many of the main motifs from the traditional versions of the Golem legend, told and retold by both Jews and Christians in Prague since the middle ages.¹⁶ The central motif is the modelling of the Golem figure from clay, its magical animation, and its return to clay when destroyed. The Hebrew word *golem* means 'unformed', or simply 'matter'. Adam, made from clay, is *golem* before he has life breathed into him by God.¹⁷ He is nothing but inert matter before being animated. So, *golem* is the silent effigy waiting to be animated. The puppets hanging lifeless in the theatre wings in *Faust*, or slumped in a box at the beginning of *Alice*, are in the state of *golem*.

The concept of the Golem allows us to draw together other threads in Švankmajer's work, particularly his use of clay as a stop motion medium (plasticine seems to be used as a fleshy alternative in the more jocular and grotesque of his films). In the short *Darkness-Light-Darkness (Tma, světlo, tma, 1989)* a generic human figure is manifested from unformed clay, a piece at a time, in a room the scale of a doll's house. The title implies the creation of life from nothingness, which will return to nothingness again. In the end it reaches the point where it can switch the light off itself, plunging the scene into darkness.

In the summoning scene in *Faust*, the devil Mephistopheles is configured through unformed clay, animated using stop motion rather than a carved mask or puppet. The clay rolls into the room and forms itself into a copy of Faust's human face; it becomes his doppelganger. Later in the film the clay Mephistopheles doppelganger appears in the mirror of an actor's dressing room, denoting at once that the devil has no more substance or soul than a reflection and that Faust himself is merely playing a part. The scene is also prefigured when Faust makes a clay homunculus in a glass vessel.¹⁸ Consistent with the Prague legend of the Golem, it is animated with a written spell inserted into its mouth. The head of Švankmajer's Golem grows larger and mimics the face of Faust before morphing into a mocking skull. Faust destroys it by removing the spell. In Jakob Grimm's version of the legend (1808) the Golem grows and grows until it crushes its maker and returns to clay again.¹⁹

¹⁶ For further discussion and review of the literature see Edan Dekel and David Gantt Gurley, "How the Golem Came to Prague" *Jewish Quarterly Review* 103/2 (2013): 241-258.

¹⁷ Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 161.

¹⁸ This artificial embryo is a Paracelsian motif distantly related to the Golem, see Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 173.

¹⁹ Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 159.

In a similar vein, Švankmajer's feature length film *Little Otik* (*Otesánek*, 2003) modernised a Czech folktale about a monstrous anthropomorphic tree root that grows out of control. Like the Golem, the monster is brought to life from dead matter. It begins life as a doll-soul, but through nurturing and emotional investment becomes an animated being. Švankmajer used real tree roots as puppets of the baby Otesánek, and switched them in succession. So the montage animation of different objects becomes a continuous being, much as a stop motion puppet may have a sequence of heads for different facial expressions.

Dead matter has life breathed into it: it is literally animated through the use of ritual magic (or in the case of *Little Otik* through a wish). The Golem legend refers to the secret of creation. In this kind of story the animated being becomes a monster out of control, even if it is technically a soulless automaton. The Golem is created ostensibly to protect the Jewish quarter in Prague from destruction. Similarly Švankmajer said: "I create my golems to protect me from the pogroms of reality."²⁰ In legend the Golem either rampages or is itself destroyed, and this also tends to happen in Švankmajer's films.

Animation is not merely a special effect but a tangible metaphor for manipulation and, potentially, for playing god. Švankmajer's interest in puppetry, animation, occult ritual, and the Golem suggest a conception of cinema as a form of magic. For him, cinema is a way of conjuring the lifeless into life. In his essay on Švankmajer, Roger Cardinal drew the analogy between animation and the occult practice of alchemy (Švankmajer himself lives in an old alchemist's house in Prague). Through animation, base matter is capable of "transcending inertia", and "...nothing in the world can really be written off as dead." In the genre of animation the objects of ordinary life divide into "the animate and inert"; the filmmaker sabotages this logic with the "...breathing of life into what is dead or has never been alive."²¹ We could say the same of the puppeteer.

²⁰ Hames, "Interview with Jan Švankmajer," 107.

²¹ Roger Cardinal, "Thinking through Things: the presence of objects in the early films of Jan Švankmajer," in *Dark Alchemy: The Films of Jan Švankmajer*, ed. Peter Hames (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1995), 89.

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