

SEEKING ŠVANKMAJER
ILLUMINATING THE DARK UNCONSCIOUS

by

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Introduction

Jan Švankmajer's films expose an uncanny, destructive and pessimistic world. They follow a unique path into a deeply personal unconscious. This subjective aesthetic carries within it deeper universal implications for the viewer. His subversive blend of animation and live action, with its supporting cast of forgotten objects gives tangible and tactile form to the unconscious. Švankmajer's work represents a unique personal dialogue with his unconscious mind and the infantile repression inherent in it. In these films the individual protagonists are dislocated from the modern world. These films denote a powerful attempt to alleviate the anxiety caused by this displacement. This thesis is concerned with Švankmajer's investigation into the unconscious mind.

In Western Europe Švankmajer's work still lacks the critical academic appraisal it clearly merits, despite an increasing recognition within the film world. A limited number of critics such as Peter Hames, Paul Wells and Michael O'Pray have engaged in a discourse about Švankmajer's work. However *Dark Alchemy: The Films of Jan Švankmajer* (1995) represents the most extensive critical consideration of Švankmajer's work published to date. Some catalogues have been published to accompany important joint exhibitions of Jan Švankmajer and Eva Švankmajerova's artwork, most notably *The Communication of Dreams* (1992). This publication accompanied an exhibition in Wales. *Anima Animus Animation* (1998), an extensive catalogue of Švankmajer's work was published for a large retrospective exhibition held in Prague Castle in 2004. Švankmajer's work has become increasingly accessible in Western Europe but *Little Otesánek* (2000) is at present the only Švankmajer film available on DVD. At the premiere of Švankmajer's most recent film, *Lunatics* (2005), in Rotterdam on the 26th January 2006 he was given a special presentation copy of Terry Gilliam's new film, *Tideland* (2005). This accolade recognised both Švankmajer's lifelong achievement in film and his major influence on the next generation of filmmakers. Švankmajer's next project *Surviving Life* has been selected for CineMart, Rotterdam's co-production market.

My first experience of Švankmajer's work was *Something of Alice* (1987), which I saw at an early stage. As a child I was amazed by the personal resonance of the world that Švankmajer revealed. He delved deep into the unconscious imaginings and dreams of childhood with their inherent mystery, magical alchemy and cruelty. *Something of Alice* is Švankmajer's masterpiece. It fuses all of his concerns and motifs in the lucid structure of a dream without professing to operate within the dream sphere. Therefore I have devoted the final chapter of this thesis to the key themes of this film. The magnitude of Švankmajer's aesthetic project is obvious: he seeks to bring everyday objects to life and give a visually tactile form to his unconscious mind through the medium of film. Cinema and, more pertinently, animation are two of the most important phenomena of the last century. They have a resounding importance for contemporary society. In 2004 I travelled to Prague and met Jan Švankmajer. I conducted an informal interview with the artist and visited his large retrospective at Prague Castle. This provided the foundation for my thesis and was the beginning of my research.

This thesis will not address the political implications of Švankmajer's work. Although these are self-evident and important,² they would require a separate study of considerable length to interpret them sufficiently. The nature of Švankmajer's work indicates that the biographical details of his life are important. The inclusion of these details, however, in the main argument of this thesis would encumber the thrust of the theoretical investigation. Therefore I have included direct biographical references only when these are essential. A complete chronological biography along with the parallel political and cultural developments of Švankmajer's generation will be included in the appendices of this thesis.³

² The communist establishment discerned the political implications of Švankmajer's films and he was forced to rest from cinema for seven years from 1973-1980.

³ The biography is adapted and elaborated from two of the most recent publications on Švankmajer, *Transmutation of the Senses* and *Anima Animus Animation*, and complemented with additional research from other sources. The historical events pertaining to Švankmajer's life were gleaned from R.J. Crampton's book: *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century*.

For a reading of the unconscious elements in Švankmajer's work, my argument is divided into four separate chapters. I have compiled a DVD to accompany this thesis. It is designed to augment the structure of the argument with the source material relevant to each section. The animated nature of the work makes this a necessity. Viewing the actual films in conjunction with the thesis will illustrate my discussion more powerfully than the straightforward inclusion of images. It includes a selection of short films reproduced in full and excerpts from some of Švankmajer's feature films.

Chapter one examines Švankmajer's films from a psychoanalytical perspective. Sigmund Freud's aesthetic concept of the uncanny will be used as a vehicle for elucidating Švankmajer's rendering of the unconscious in his films. *Down to the Cellar* (1982) is professed by the author to be his most autobiographical film. Within the discussion of this film the uncanny will be used to highlight the intrinsic elements of magic, illusion, repetition and fear that bind the work together. *A Quiet Week in a House* (1969) along with its motifs of voyeurism, animism and the psychological compartmentalization of the psyche will also be explored in relation to the uncanny. Subjectivity and objectivity along with notions of infantile repression will be examined in these films. D. W. Winnicott's theories about 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena' will serve as a conduit for this investigation. Finally Winnicott's theories will also expose the core infantile repressions that lie at the heart of the uncanny in Švankmajer's work.

The second chapter isolates the intrinsic rudiments of destruction in Švankmajer's films. Julia Kristeva's writings on abjection in *The Powers of Horror* (1982) are used to analyse food loathing and cannibalism as they are manifested in *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982) and the two very short films, *Flora* (1989) and *Meat Love* (1989). The repetitive destruction will be justified as authentication of reality. The abject, is employed in reference to the dissolution of boundaries functioning as recognition of the impossible constituted within man. *The Death of Stalinism in Bohemia* (1990) is read as a personal catharsis after the forty years of Stalinism Švankmajer endured. This catharsis is understood as a release from

anxiety. Aggression, sadomasochism and Freud's concept of the 'Death Instinct' are all exercised in an attempt to dispel anxiety and fear. These personal anxieties will be seen to have universal significance when transmitted through the medium of film.

Chapter three explores Švankmajer's distrust of language, which surfaces in his films. *Dimensions of Dialogue* will be dissected to expose Švankmajer's ideas on the failures and absurdities of human communication. The ambiguous events from *A Quiet Week in a House* will be analysed and discussed as examples of the decimation of language in Švankmajer's work. *Something of Alice* and *Jabberwocky* (1971) are singled out in relation to Lewis Carroll's illogical manipulations of meaning in language. *The Lesson of Faust* (1994) will also be touched upon from the narrative's post-modern perspective of history. Roland Barthes will provide some theoretical insight into the problems of language in contemporary society.

The fourth and final chapter deals exclusively with *Something of Alice* because it represents a unique paradigm that embodies all of the elements discussed in the preceding chapters. It will investigate the unique technique of animation that Švankmajer employs, and focus on some other marginal techniques and motifs that Švankmajer utilizes. Some of these outmoded cultural constructs such as puppetry; obsolete objects, romantic ruins and concrete irrationality will be used to explicate the simulacrum of the unconscious that is *Something of Alice*. The theories of Jean Baudrillard will be used to support this interpretation of a hyper-real simulacrum.



Švankmajer's and the Object of the Uncanny

The films of Jan Švankmajer are informed primarily by his unconscious experience with all its inherent mystery and cruelty. Theoretically the uncanny provides a valuable point of departure for an aesthetic investigation because it is possible to locate unconscious repression within the uncanny. Švankmajer delves deep into his own unconscious to create an uncanny world that affects his audience psychologically. Reality and unreality are forced together in his work and the boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity dissolve so that it is impossible to decipher whether the images are a projection from another's unconscious or an alternate reality. The events of his films take the form of never-ending cycles of destruction. Within these the uncanny appears as animation, repetition, disintegration, dismemberment, mutilation, fetishism and abjection. Švankmajer elicits a hyper real impression of a regression to the infantile state. The aesthetic of Švankmajer's work parallels many of the qualities attributed to the uncanny. Therefore an investigation into the reasons for creating this uncanny world with all of its implications will serve to enhance the revelations he presents from his unconscious.

In his discussion Sigmund Freud quotes a definition of the uncanny (or 'unheimlich' in German) from Schelling, the 'Unheimlich is the name for everything that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden but has come to light'. (Freud) It is seen as something familiar that had previously undergone a form of repression but now resurfaces unexpectedly. Andre Breton refers to cinema's '*power to disorient*'. (Matthews, 1971, pp.1-2) The disorientation of this experience creates 'a somewhat muted sense of horror: horror tinged with confusion.' (Kelley, 2004, p.26) The emotion generated is not terror. Nevertheless the witness is significantly unnerved into a psychologically unfamiliar area. The 'paradox of horror', described by Noel Carroll incorporates the attraction of the uncanny. 'This paradox amounts to the question of how people can be attracted by what is repulsive.' (Carroll, 1990, p.160) The satisfactory aspect of the uncanny and the desire to reproduce this feeling through

art is probably derived out of a release from the logical and expected. Yet it is something that must be edged with real fear for this liberation to feel authentic. The uncanny is veiled by doubt and paranoia; uncertainties of whether an inanimate object might be alive or whether an apparently living being is really a mechanized illusion, like 'ingeniously constructed dolls and automata'. (Freud) Our various emotive responses to the uncanny such as dread, anxiety and confusion are also excited when we recognize the involuntary aspects of 'epileptic fits and manifestations of insanity' (Freud), which in effect render the human mechanical and point to some unseen force manipulating the individual.

The uncanny is also manifested within 'the double':

The archaic, narcissistic self, not yet demarcated by the outside world, projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself, making of it an alien double, uncanny and demoniacal. (Kristeva, 1991, p.183)

When the original function of 'the double' is inverted it is transformed from being 'an insurance against the destruction of the ego', created at an early stage in mental development, into a thing of terror; 'the uncanny harbinger of death'. (Freud) At instances such as encounters with 'the double' when the uncanny is evoked, the individual experiences a 'regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world.' (Freud) This regression is also related to the uncanny experienced when the 'distinction between imagination and reality is effaced' infusing the uncanny with the effect of helplessness and confusion. (Freud) This infantile anxiety is induced most effectively by solitude, silence, darkness and most importantly the fear of death. These ominous undertones link the uncanny to more powerful aesthetic emotions such as the abject and the sublime. The uncanny, like the sublime is linked to repetition or a compulsion to repeat. The sublime however, is evoked by repetition toward awe-inspiring infinity, whereas the uncanny suggests the apparent repetition of something confusing and possibly foreboding such as unsettling experiences of *déjà-vu*.

An integral aspect of Švankmajer's art touches on the vaguely defined area described as the unconscious. He realizes aspects of his unconscious from dreams and games in a disturbing manner that can be analyzed through Freud's concept of the uncanny. He fulfils, challenges and even elaborates on some of the attributes Freud elucidates in his discussion. Two aspects of the uncanny, on which Freud bases his argument, are 'doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate'. (Freud) Švankmajer employs objects in his films, not simply as props but as living things imbued with their own life force, memory and personal agenda. He also uses the opposite technique, which elicits the uncanny and forces us to doubt whether apparently living human beings, like ourselves, are really alive at all. In his first film, *The Last Trick of Mr Schwarzwalde and Mr Edgar* (1964), he was already pioneering the use of life-size puppets that perform increasingly elaborate feats of magic until they eventually destroy one another with a violent handshake. He utilizes this to great effect in *The Lesson of Faust* when the human protagonist literally has a shaft drilled into his head, effectively rendering him a puppet under the control of an unseen puppeteer. Again in *Something of Alice* the central character of Alice is not only shrunk to tiny proportions, she is actually transformed into a china doll, ingeniously incorporating a metamorphosis of these core elements of the uncanny. Later Alice is also cocooned in her own effigy but her eyes are still visible, darting erratically in amazement.

Švankmajer's father was a window dresser and his mother a dressmaker. His mother's occupation would have meant that mannequins would have haunted the background of his childhood. His father's occupation can be likened to the technique of film, with the shop front doubling as the projection screen and the organization of different commodities within the shop window serving as a parallel for the animator's manipulation of objects. Many of Švankmajer's themes, such as the cellar, food and puppets, have their origins in his traumatic childhood. Even the dark paranoia and claustrophobia is endemic of this early period in Švankmajer's life due to the Nazi invasion of his home country before Švankmajer had reached the age of four and the following incorporation of Czechoslovakia under the communist dominion of the Soviet Union. He had

nightmares as a child, in which he was constantly trying to escape foreign soldiers who had invade his house.

It is useful to discuss a paradigm of his childhood memory as he has translated it into film: ‘If I had to identify one film which I think of as more subjective and autobiographical than the others, then that film would be *Down to the Cellar.*’ (Švankmajer Documentary) Within *Down to the Cellar* (1982) Švankmajer

establishes a seemingly real world before we are plunged into the foreboding unreality of the cellar. It is important that Švankmajer does not use the framing device of a dream state here that is often used as a means of explaining bizarre and disarming events in film, particularly animation,



although the descent to the cellar is a possible metaphor for a descent into the unconscious. The style of the film does not change when we enter the cellar and we are given no indication that this will be the site of so many surreal and uncanny scenarios. In effect, the distinction between reality and the child’s imagination is blurred, which is another cause of the uncanny emotion according to Freud. The obvious gothic ‘factors of silence, solitude and darkness’ in *Down to the Cellar* that Freud alludes to in *The Uncanny* produce ‘the infantile anxiety from which the majority of human beings have [sic] never become quite free.’ (Freud) These effects are coupled with the exaggerated caricatures of the two, already subtly intimidating, adults whom the prepubescent protagonist encounters on the staircase. Later, when they appear ostensibly as projections of the manifest fears of the young girl, they achieve a truly uncanny status. The old man has prepared a cot full of coal as a bed for the child at the end of his own bed. His body is already beneath a blanket of coal. His intentions are ambiguous. He beckons to the young girl to settle down for the night but she backs away from the spectacle with an expression of bemused horror.



Before she can flee she witnesses a second disturbing scenario. The old woman, who she encountered on the stairs, is portrayed in a perpetual cycle of baking, but instead of flour she uses coal dust to make her cakes. These coal cakes are then in turn used to fuel the stove and generate yet more coal cakes. This alludes to uncanny repetition or a compulsion to repeat that Švankmajer is constantly highlighting. This draws a parallel to the uncanny inherent in cinema; repetition, illusion and the familiar made unfamiliar. When she notices the little girl is watching, a wry grin spreads across her face. She then turns around, selecting a lump of coal and dusting it with icing sugar, to give to the little girl to eat. Her smile quickly disappears when the child backs away shaking her head. As outlined by Freud, the uncanny in a living person exists when we ‘ascribe evil intentions to him’ which ‘are going to be carried out with the help of special powers.’(Freud) Undoubtedly, we already suspect the motives of these adults, and their surreal actions touch on alchemical processes (most notably their use of coal) that are akin to the magical and mysterious. O’Pray sees the paradox of *Down to the Cellar*



...as an ambiguity between a subjectivist narrative and an anti-psychologicistic one, with the grotesque elements being neutralised by the identification with the internal states of the central

character: the little girl. (It is in this sort of ambiguity that an uncanny effect can be created) (O'Pray, 1989, pp.257-258)

An earlier Švankmajer film, *A Quiet Week in A House* (1969), opens with a shot of a mysterious camouflaged man spying on through a pair of binoculars on a house. He pulls a diagram of this house out of his nose, examines it and then promptly eats it. Then he sprints in a frenzied rush towards the house.



This is an odd opening, leaving us baffled as to this man's purpose or intention. The house he is spying on could be taken literally as the home, due to its mundane familiar appearance.⁴ The style this sequence is filmed in is sepia with staccato editing along with dust and scratches, giving the impression that this film is either very old or that elements have been removed. We can also hear the sound of a projector throughout. The tension built up during the approach to the house is utterly abandoned and the viewer's expectations are confounded by the man's calm repose. He proceeds to perform various dubious actions with an air of composed efficiency. He then drills a hole through one of the doors that surround him, brushing the sawdust out and peering voyeuristically into the secret chamber. These proceedings seem unnecessarily repeated and emphasized for six of the seven days he ostensibly spends in the house. The sound of the projector stops when the camera adopts the voyeur's



subjective perspective of the space and in fact there is no sound to accompany any of the uncanny events contained in the six rooms. The image is now in colour. This is important, as Švankmajer obviously wants the viewer to question which of

⁴ William Kentridge also employs buildings as metaphors for the psyche and memory in his animated film *Tidetable* (2004). Kentridge is a South-African artist who animates charcoal drawings.

the two realities that he presents is more real. These two realities confront and challenge one another. Importance and control in the film are constantly shifting between the two realities so that it is never clear what, if anything, is supposed to be real.

The events that now unfold behind the closed door in this secret area are most accurately described as uncanny⁵. The six rooms the camera invades suggest a compartmentalization of the psyche. Objects move by themselves but their animation is not a perfect illusion. There is a flickering between each image so that the eye perceives the after image three or four times in every frame, another repetition that has the uncanny resemblance of a hallucination. In the first of these uncanny chambers, a tin, decorated with the image of a happy child, manifests itself out of nowhere to sit atop a table. It then opens and a large quantity of sweets pour out. This image may excite the viewer or elicit a kind of nostalgia but this emotion is soon dispelled when the sweets unwrap one by one to reveal rusty screws and bolts. As these dangerous objects issue forth they continuously mutate in scale presenting a host of uncanny ‘doubles’ in a sequence of visually echoing repetition. In other rooms: excrement-like clay literally pours out of a dresser, overwhelming and destroying a little clockwork bird. Pigeons are killed and plucked of every feather in order that a chair may make a pathetic attempt to fly. A phallic tube projects out of an empty coat simply to suck the water out of vase of flowers and then blithely urinate onto the floor while the flowers wither and burn at an alarming



rate. The final room exposes a secret mutilation of dismembered pigs feet inside a wardrobe. The camera zooms out and the door closes to maintain the covert operation. After witnessing all of these uncanny proceedings the man places dynamite in every hole that he has drilled. He then connects this to an alarm clock and sets the bomb in motion. However as he is escaping he suddenly remembers

⁵ ‘Equally, they could be symbolic of the horrors of the Czech state under Soviet domination, the film being made in the year after the Soviet military suppression of the liberal Czech government.’ (O’Pray, 1995, p.59)

something and with the logic of an obsessional neurotic he dashes back inside simply to scribble out the final day. He flees but the film ends before we see the building explode or possibly and more radically the omnipresent viewer is implicated to such an extent that we are destroyed with the house in the explosion. In which case the cut to black represents the destruction of our voyeurism.

Švankmajer has said, 'For me, objects are more alive than people, more permanent and more expressive. The memories they possess far exceed the memories of man. Objects conceal within themselves the events they've witnessed...' (Wells, 1999, p.90) Bruno Schulz's father figure, from *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934), explains: 'There is no dead matter...lifelessness is only a disguise behind which hide unknown forms of life.' (Nelson, 2001, p.91)

Švankmajer animates the lives of objects in an attempt to extract the memories of the experiences they have soaked up. This extraction could be perceived as a rejection of the need to surmount the primitive animistic beliefs that Freud refers to in *The Uncanny*, or from another perspective as the expression of a desire for this animism in objects to fulfil an unknown ulterior motive of the artist. Švankmajer's dialogue with his childhood has fuelled the creation of some of his most powerful films such as *Something of Alice*, *Jabberwocky* and sequences from *The Lesson of Faust*. I think that it would be pertinent to apply some aspects from D.W. Winnicott's analysis of 'Transitional objects and Transitional Phenomena' to Švankmajer's work. This provides some insight into the powerful links the films have with Freud, from the perspective of the uncanny as a regression to infantile or animistic beliefs. This will shed some light on Švankmajer's fascination with objects and his obsession with projecting, into his films, distortions of his regressive discourse.

'When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning.' (Baudrillard, 1983, p.12) This discourse is not a form of nostalgia in the strictest sense because Švankmajer is not mourning a part of his life that he has lost nor is he attempting to induce in his audience this wistful satisfaction. He does not see his childhood as something that is very far behind him. Perhaps Švankmajer

endeavours, 'To reclaim nostalgia as not only a mode of memory but also a mode of history' and this 'would mean considering it as a strategy - as a response to social conditions and, in fact, as a form of therapy.'⁶ ...Nostalgia was originally a disorder...but by the early nineteenth century it had become a remedy for the experience of dislocation that was becoming endemic to modernity' (Gibbons, 2002, pp.47-49) In this sense perhaps, Švankmajer harnesses nostalgia and the uncanny not to criticize the condition of modern society but as a form of therapy; albeit shock therapy. Winnicott's describes nostalgia as the 'precarious hold that a person may have on the inner representation of a lost object.' (1985, p.27)

Winnicott observes, 'most mothers allow their infants some special object and expect them to become, as it were, addicted to such objects.' (1985, p.1) This is also true of Švankmajer, who was at an early age, given a puppet theatre for Christmas. This object became a permanent part of his mental morphology. (Švankmajer, 1998, p.170) While it cannot be described as a 'transitional object' in the sense that Winnicott discusses this phenomenon, it has been of paramount importance in Švankmajer's adult artistic life. Švankmajer's early childhood could easily be likened to a life-size theatre in light of his parents respective occupations, of window dresser and dressmaker. Transitional objects as they appear in Švankmajer's films are simultaneously artwork and fetishes indulged in by the artist. This is not simply an illustration of a general idea of childhood but a personal attempt to recreate the actual atmosphere, emotions and mindset of Švankmajer's own childhood. Švankmajer's use of objects in this manner harkens back to a period when children were unable to distinguish between the external world of objects and the internal world of the psyche. *Jabberwocky* (1971) represents this pure world of transitional phenomena. Švankmajer utilizes the child's animated or 'transitional object' in the earliest stages of the shift from subjective to objective perception.

Some of the attributes that Winnicott ascribes to the 'transitional object' are that it will be 'excitedly loved and mutilated...it must survive this instinctual loving, and

⁶ Nicholas Dumes, *Austen's Nostalgics*, 2001

also hating and if it be a feature, pure aggression... Yet it must show it has vitality or reality of its own'; It does not come from without, from the point of view of the baby. 'Neither does it come from within; it is not a hallucination.' (1985, p.6) In most instances Švankmajer animated living objects and films adhere to these conditions. Winnicott states that the transitional object's 'fate is to be gradually allowed to be deattached so that in the course of years it becomes not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo'. (1985, p.6) When extracted from this psychological limbo, objects are imbued with their original magical qualities. The fact that he makes use of a wide range of varied objects hints, perhaps, at the possibility of a collective unconscious of objects. Each article is a 'dead object that has a life of its own, a life that is somehow dependent on *you*, and is intimately connected in some secret manner.' (Kelley, 2004, p.26)

The visual experience of the uncanny is ultimately satisfying; at least as it is experienced through the medium of film. As paradoxical as this seems the uncanny in art is entertaining. The striking difference with which we appreciate the uncanny in art, as opposed to the uncanny in reality, implies that it provokes curiosity, excites the senses and in extreme instances it provides a release from the rational and mundane in life. This is due to the actual psychological detachment, where the person does not experience real terror when viewing the artwork. The actual fear of the uncanny in reality is diluted and transformed, through art, into an uneasy anxiety. However the world of Švankmajer's films does not belong to the fantasy genre, for as Freud states in *The Uncanny*,⁷ the realm of fantasy cannot excite the uncanny; 'feeling cannot arise unless there is a conflict of judgment as to whether things which have been 'surmounted' and are regarded as incredible may not, after all, be possible'. (Freud) Švankmajer's filmic reality is firmly positioned in the everyday, even if it is the adaptation of a fairytale like *Alice in Wonderland*. The uncanny inherent in this method of adaptation stems from the familiarity most viewers will have with the fictitious worlds Švankmajer exploits. The reality of these films is re-experienced as all too authentic and familiar. Although the viewer is aware of the illusion, the reality presented in Švankmajer's films is too close to everyday reality for the viewer to remain comfortably passive.

⁷ Freud, Sigmund, *The Uncanny*, <http://www.rohan.sdsu.edu/~amtower/uncanny.html>

Cycles of Destruction:

Švankmajer and the Horror of Abjection

Švankmajer employs obsessive repetition in many of his films. These repetitions are in evidence in the types of objects, scenarios, sets, motifs, dialogue and certain stylistic attitudes he demonstrates. They are to be found recurring a number of times in one film and frequently similar devices and scenarios populate his entire oeuvre. The repetitions have led to a recognizable style that could be described as Švankmajeresque, and which parallels the gloomy and disturbing paranoia that typifies the literary work of Franz Kafka. Švankmajer uses this repetition to create a convincingly realistic and familiar world, which is derived from our perceived reality but manipulated and distorted into a surreal parallel cinema world. The repetition lends reliability to this cinematic world. It is a place where objects and people function with the logic of 'concrete irrationality'. This is a world where the viewer can expect the unexpected and yet depend on events to function within a solid conception of reality. However the world of Švankmajer's films is constantly in a state of flux. Everything is in the process of being destroyed and finally reconstituted.

One dominating scenario that Švankmajer varyingly exploits to the point of obsession is that of cyclical destruction. Objects, puppets, and representations of human beings, and even real human protagonists are annihilated in cannibalistic, sadistic and often masochistic rituals of mutilation to the point of total obliteration. Some are chaotic spectacles involving the reduction of a recognizable entity to faecal matter; other instances are sublime demonstrations of the dissolution of ostensibly living matter through the rapid acceleration of time or the manipulation of objects and characters to the point of abjection and death. In many cases death is not an adequate description of the destruction in Švankmajer's films unless we indulge in the animistic belief that the objects he uses are living beings themselves. The object's survival of this hatred and destruction is important in light of Winnicott's notion of transitional objects. It is revealed through the relentless attack Švankmajer carries out on objects, which he

has collected and obviously attributed with some value. The objects survive this destruction in a variety of ways. They are preserved in memory or through the actual illusion of the film, caught in an endless repetition of their demise and they are often reconstituted to appear in another film. These objects subvert our notion of reality, confounding our knowledge about how things should behave

‘It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order, what does not respect borders, positions, rules.’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.4) This disintegration of boundaries is a core aspect in Kristeva’s research into notions surrounding abjection. In terms of the viewer’s emotional reaction it is more difficult to justify Švankmajer’s imagery as abject. The intensity of the concept is somewhat diluted because it is encountered in the mimetic art of film. Film is at a remove from reality and therefore it can only act as a signifier for the real abject. Our experience of the abject is infinitely more powerful in reality. Film is, however, capable of deceiving us to some degree. Kristeva describes the abject as the impossible, the inconceivable and this is experienced as an emotion or reaction when the subject realizes that the impossible constitutes its very being. In contrast to the uncanny, within the abject we can discern nothing familiar, no reassuring repression.

A common thread running through a number of Švankmajer’s films is the illustration of the abject inherent in food. Food is a universal human need, a primary and inevitable desire and yet ‘Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection.’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.2) This abhorrence of food is an apparent paradox but it is within this contradiction that Švankmajer’s art flourishes. Many of his films are unremittingly preoccupied with an ostensible revulsion. Whether or not this is a personal disgust on Švankmajer’s part is not altogether clear. As far back as 1968, in the Kafkaesque film *The Flat*, Švankmajer purveyed an artistically rendered aversion of food. Various victuals appear to conspire against the unfortunate protagonist of *The Flat* successfully preventing him from satisfying his hunger. Various visual puns are used to illustrate the impossible and the abject in food. For example the man cannot eat because a fat mouse has hollowed out the loaf of bread; his soup spoon

is perforated with holes; an egg is harder than concrete and a tankard of beer changes its shape and size as he lifts it to his mouth so that when he finally gets to drink all he gets is a sip from a thimble-sized glass.

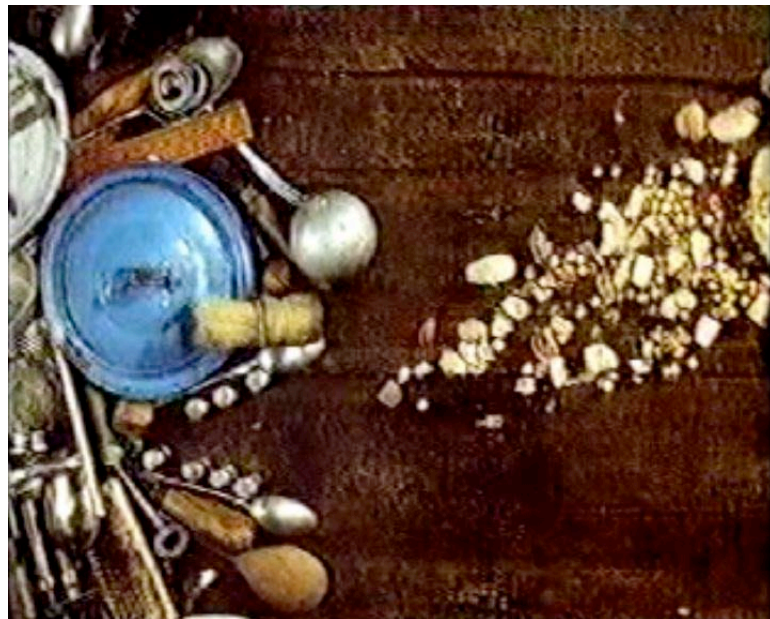


After the seven-year period in the 1970s when the communist establishment forced him to rest from cinema, Švankmajer's fixation on food picks up momentum. Although there are references to the repugnance surrounding the corruption of food in *Jabberwocky*, such as the accelerated rotting of an apple or the cannibalistic doll's tea party. It is not until 1982 that food becomes an integral theme in his films. *Eternal Dialogue* is the first scenario in the triadic structure of *Dimensions of Dialogue*. The opening shot shows the profile of a human head comprised of fruit, vegetables and various items of food in the style of the mannerist painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo.⁸



⁸ Arcimboldo employed this fantastic mannerist style in many of his allegorical portraits depicting an anonymous human head constituted of fruit, vegetables, fish, animals, books

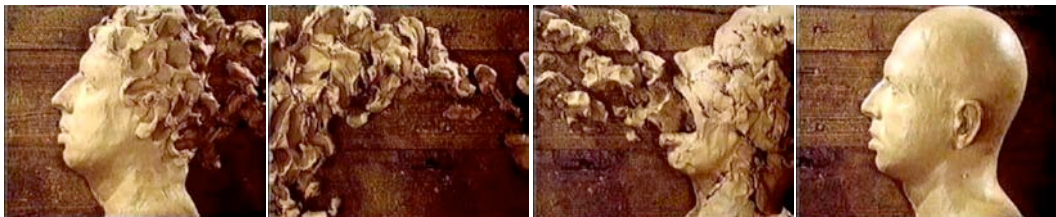
This figure walks to meet another figure, similarly constructed but out of various utensils useful for everyday living. When they meet, the latter gnashes his teeth, opens his jaws wide and swallows the former. The objects combine in an orgy of destruction where the elements mingle and the utensils defile the fruit and vegetables, reducing the food to compost: keys burrow into cabbages, razors shave cucumbers, a nutcracker crushes sugar cubes into dust and a salami is frayed and mangled between a brush and a cheese grater. The head made of various utensils then vomits all of the defiled food, which reconstitutes itself back into a somewhat grotesque human head. This mess of despoiled food highlights ‘the repulsion aroused by *food remainders*...Remainders are the residues of something but especially of someone. They pollute on account of incompleteness.’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.76)



The head, comprised of utensils, then turns around and continues on a walk to meet a third head, which is made up of various items associated with art, literature and film; in other words items associated with the educated mind. When these two heads confront one another a similar spectacle ensues but the implements of education destroy the tools for living: books crush pots, pans and porcelain plates and an envelope flattens thimbles in a rapid montage of devastation. This

and fire. He worked in the court of Maximilian II in Vienna and Rudolf II in Prague towards the end of the sixteenth century.

cannibalistic ritual is repeated nine times until three heads are effectively reduced to faecal matter or elemental clay. The sequence ends with a sublime vision of epiphenomena in which these clay heads repeatedly spew out replicas of themselves continuously toward infinity. The grotesque image fades to black leaving no conclusion to this seemingly endless abject cycle. ‘Human beings caught flush with their animality, wallowing in their vomit...’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.147)



There is a huge array of similar references to food and its transient repugnant quality in the rest of Švankmajer’s work most notably *Meat in Love* and *Flora*⁹ (Both 1989). *Meat in Love* is a grotesquely comical short film in which two raw steaks come to life and conduct a brief courtship before their lovemaking is interrupted and both are fried. *Flora* is more ambiguously unsettling. An Arcimboldo style woman, made of fruit, is tied to a bed. The food disintegrates before our eyes and maggots quickly consume their helpless victim. She reaches in vain for salvation, in the form of a glass of water. An enormous tension builds in this thirty-second sequence due to the temporal compression and the intensity of the exaggerated sound of decomposing food, at one point there is even the sound of a siren in the background. ‘Food becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories. A boundary between nature and culture, between the human and the non-human.’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.75) There is no humour in this imagery. The thinly veiled message is simply that all food will eventually turn rancid. Humanity, dependent and formed out of these transient elements, will eventually be destroyed. Švankmajer ‘uses the natural corruption of flowers to reveal simultaneously a sexual sadism and a sarcastic comment on

⁹ Both of these very short films were commissioned by MTV.

modern civilization's rape of the natural world.' (O'Pray, 1992, p.21) In short, this film is a testimony to the impossible, hidden within our own being.

Food (1992) shares a similar triadic structure with *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982) but it is here that Švankmajer's obsessive food loathing finds total expression. The film is divided into the three main meals of the day and in each there are three characters. *Breakfast* consists of a sequence in which three men exchange the function of a human vending machine and consumer. After deciphering a complex set of directions the customer receives his meal. This film is extremely complex in its careful calculation and construction of an important taboo: cannibalism. In *Food* Švankmajer's imagery becomes increasingly explicit and his humour shockingly tragic. *Food* is essentially humorous, although this humour teeters on the edge of deep-seated horror, and finds a contemporary, popular equivalent in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Delicatessen* (1991)



Švankmajer describes his film, *The Death of Stalinism in Bohemia*, on the subject of post-communism as a kind of catharsis, which he uses to rid himself of the tension accumulated within him during the forty years of his life under Stalinism. The film opens with a lurid operation. A living statue of Stalin is placed on the

operating table. A terrible and symbolic cadaver, ‘...it is the human corpse that excites the greatest concentration of abjection and fascination.’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.149) The surgeon makes a deep incision into the face of the effigy revealing the bloody viscera contained within. He then proceeds to deliver the bust of Klement Gottwald complete with an umbilical cord and the first wails of a newborn baby. The blood is washed off the bust and the doctor slaps the newborn introducing it to the pain of reality. Kristeva ‘...locates the ultimate of abjection...in the birth giving...(between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death), horror and beauty, sexuality and the blunt negation of the sexual.’ (1982, p.155) The obvious political metaphor conceals within a deeper sense the ‘ultimate of abjection’ delivered with grotesque horror



Georges Bataille suggests that there is an,

...asymptotic point where fascination and the most abject terror coincide, a perception that ‘extreme seductiveness is probably at the boundary of horror.’ The slit eye episode in the opening scene of *Un Chien andalou* provides, in Bataille’s opinion, our best approximation of that point by revealing ‘to what extent horror becomes fascinating, and how it alone is brutal enough to break everything that stifles’. (Lomas, 2000, p.162)

Švankmajer’s work reveals a preoccupation with the inevitability of destruction through aggression, and some instances are described above in the context of the abject. His metaphorical renderings draw a parallel with Freud’s concept of the

‘Death instinct’ known as ‘Thanatos’. However as Fromm points out Freud subsumes every passion into two categories and therefore generalizes the problem of man’s destructiveness. Freud presupposes an innate tendency in man toward destruction, but experiments have shown ‘that the male hormone was a stimulation for pejorative fighting behaviour, but not a condition without which it could not occur.’ (Fromm, 1997, p.257) Švankmajer’s cyclical destruction is supposedly a defensive aggression, one that the artist describes as a type of catharsis. It is a pseudo-aggression that is not intended to cause harm. The extent of his artistic aggression is visual devastation. Almost everything is either destroyed or transformed beyond recognition. This can be understood as a release from repression, either personal or political. But it belies a certain sadomasochistic pleasure that is derived from a type of destruction. In terms of animation, animism and art, this relates back to Winnicott’s ‘Transitional Object’ and the conditions of instinctual loathing and attack that an object must survive. Therefore the on-screen destructiveness relates to primary narcissism as the repressed core, and the transition from subjective to objective relationships to exterior reality. However under the shadow of psychoanalysis and reason Švankmajer is not only performing an exorcism of his repressed narcissism but also apparently torturing himself and his audience. It is within the black humour and the grotesque proliferating Švankmajer’s films that we locate clear traces of masochism and sadism.

This is not physical sadism but psychological sadism in the sense that it induces imagined and metaphorical pain. Yet if we assume the primal animism of the objects Švankmajer manipulates, the destructive animation of these objects becomes increasingly sadistic. Consequently these films are documents of real torture, explained as only the victim can explain torture. The psychological masochism of the audience is revealed in the fact that they seek out this horror collectively and the magnitude of this phenomenon is obvious in all areas of the arts. This collective obsession with horror is linked to eroticism and death. Death and destruction fascinate because we are aware of this inevitability and yet we cannot conceive of it in logical, rational or intellectual terms. It is also here that we can locate the abject, the ultimate dissolution of boundaries, the impossible

and the sublime. 'When blended with sexuality, the death instinct is transformed into more harmless impulses expressed in sadism or masochism.' (Fromm, 1997, p.40) There are echoes of the Marquis de Sade's writings throughout Švankmajer's work, such as the Sadean engravings that are juxtaposed with images of Czechoslovakia's national athletic displays in *The Death of Stalinism in Bohemia*. These engravings are the same images used in the title sequence of *Conspirators of Pleasure* (1996), which is a black comedy about fetishes, repression and sadomasochism illuminated through a string of different people. In Švankmajer's work we can discern an affinity with Sade in 'a naturalistic and mechanistic approach imbued with the mathematical spirit. This accounts for the endless repetitions, the reiterated quantitative process...' (Deleuze, 1989, p. 20)

But why does Švankmajer indulge in this masochistic ritual of creation and destruction? He obviously takes great pleasure in the self-inflicted torture of the animation process. In this respect he is a masochist and so too are the characters and protagonists of his films. 'Punishment¹⁰, in their view, would only figure so prominently because of its function in resolving anxiety and thereby making pleasure possible.' (Deleuze, 1989, p.91) Pain is a rite of passage; a contract that dissolves repression, yet 'pain¹¹ only acquires significance in relation to the forms of repetition which condition its use.' (Deleuze, 1989, p.119) The actual pain involved in making, viewing or imagining Svankmajer's films is not the actual goal. From the masochistic perspective pain is simply an essential tool in alleviating anxiety, depression and despair in the face of abjection.

'Man detaches himself from his surroundings; he feels alone, abandoned, ignorant of everything except that he knows nothing...His first feeling thus was existential anxiety, which may even have taken him to the limits of despair. (F.M. Bergounioux, 1964)' (Fromm, 1997, p.309) 'Mere 'anxiety', as Heidegger says, is at the source of everything.' (Camus, 1942, p. 157) This is true of

¹⁰ 'The masochist regards the law as a punitive process and therefore begins by having the punishment inflicted upon himself; once he has undergone the punishment, he feels that he is allowed or commanded to experience the pleasure that the law was supposed to forbid.' (Deleuze, 1989, p.88)

¹¹ '...there is no direct relation to pain: pain should be regarded as an effect only.' (from Deleuze, 1989, p.121)

Švankmajer's work when he reveals anxiety as 'a common denominator' for all his films. (Švankmajer Documentary) Švankmajer describes his films as a battle against the unpleasant emotions of anxiety and fear. His 'weapons are sarcasm, irony and black humour.' (Švankmajer Documentary) 'If the cause of our worry is obvious...then we tend to call the feeling *fear* (old English *faer* meant sudden danger)...*anxious* (from the Latin *anxius*, meaning troubled about an uncertain event, and a Greek root meaning to press tight or strangle).' (Marks, 2001, p.4) Švankmajer names his unconscious demons transforming them from anxieties to fears, keeping them at bay with this act.

This accounts in part for the aggressive destruction intrinsically interwoven into all of his work. 'One of the most effective ways of getting rid of anxiety is to become aggressive.'¹² (Fromm, 1997, p.268) The art becomes a form of therapy for the artist and when it is successful it performs a type of catharsis. The audience is implicated in an intensely personal fear that draws on universal anxieties. The comic and the humorous in the work evidence this therapeutic element. The cruelly sadistic imagination of a child is allowed to run wild, employed as an effective combatant of fear and abjection. As Kristeva points out

...laughter bursts out, facing abjection, and always originating at the same source, of which Freud caught a glimpse: the gushing forth of the unconscious, the repressed, suppressed pleasure, be it sex or death. And yet if there is a gushing forth, it is neither jovial, nor trustful, nor sublime, nor enraptured by preexisting harmony. It is bare, anguished, and as fascinated as it is frightened. (1982, p.206)

Noel Carroll posits a range of ideas that attempt to explain society's attractions to horror. While none of these is empirically conclusive enough for Carroll, they relate to Švankmajer's work and provide a theoretical argument for the powers of horror in his work. The paradox that Carroll investigates is that of how people can be attracted to that which is ultimately repulsive in art and yet be repelled by it in reality. The division of this dichotomy is into the physical and the psychological. In reality horrific encounters may actually have the power to harm

¹² 'its original meaning of 'aggressing', can be defined as moving forward towards a goal without undue hesitation, doubt, or fear.' (Fromm, 1997, p.256)

or even destroy but in art they will not cause any perceptible physical damage although the psychological implications are much more difficult to discern. I have, thus far, questioned what attracts Švankmajer to creating the grotesque, the abject and the uncanny in film and why audiences find this entertaining. One parallel with Carroll's argument is the idea that monsters are heroic because they represent ideas and emotions that society unconsciously represses. (Carroll, 1990, p.160) Švankmajer's work is repulsive yet compelling because it hints at areas of the unconscious that we do not recognize, which we repress. Švankmajer's art is a psychological catharsis in the sense that it is a purgation of unconscious emotions and this is achieved through catharsis in the medicinal sense through the creation and reduction of objects to faecal matter as a means of expelling them as fears and reducing anxiety.

‘Dimensions of Dialogue’

In the psychotopographic universe language is also subject to transformation, and its disintegration from a vehicle for recognizable human communication into something “other” - both divine and demonic – also signals the shift into the transcendental world of merged subject and object. (Nelson, 2001, p.119)

Švankmajer’s films, most notably *Dimensions of Dialogue*, mordantly dissect the absurdities of language exposing its inherent failings and simplifications of human emotion. Švankmajer calls this “a purely ideological film”. (Švankmajer Documentary) It represents Švankmajer’s vehement belief in the power of the image over the word: film over language. When faced with the visual, language crumbles.

The objects Švankmajer employs function as metaphors for the failings of human nature and language. The rapport that Švankmajer has with objects is one that he has lost with society. Švankmajer states that ‘The essential is not voiced. It cannot be. Human speech is too inadequate to express deeper feelings such as love, horror, joy, sadness, fury, disgust. “Pure” dialogue without a “picture” is really therefore a cripple.’ (Švankmajer, 1998, p.157) ‘Language learning takes place as an attempt to appropriate an oral “object” that slips away and whose hallucination, necessarily deformed, threatens us from the outside.’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.41) *Dimensions of Dialogue* itself contains no actual verbal communication and yet it is a scathing, sceptical criticism of the medium. The first sequence, *Eternal Dialogue* is a perpetual cycle of redundant repetition fuelled by food, industry and knowledge. It is ultimately a reductive replication of ideas and knowledge, which Roland Barthes described in reference specifically to literature, as ‘a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.’ (Barthes, 1984)

The final sequence in *Dimensions of Dialogue*, *Exhaustive Dialogue*, analyzes the alleged rationality or logic of language. The first scene in this act uses visual metaphor to demonstrate a successful, if somewhat surreal, discursive exchange between two elderly looking clay busts. Neither head utters a word and both look

shocked when various objects protrude from their mouths. The first head ejects a toothbrush and the second answers rationally with the toothpaste. This display continues with a variety of objects encountering the appropriate counterpart, including a sharpener on a large animal tongue¹³, most notable for its grotesquerie, which meets a pencil. However when the heads switch places the success of their communication deteriorates radically. Disparate inapt objects now conjoin in an unpleasant and chaotic succession of rapidly edited shots: a pencil is buttered; a shoe is sharpened and a shoelace is covered in toothpaste. The two plainly deteriorating heads swap places for the last time. Now each object meets its double. The shoelaces become tangled, the toothbrushes whittle down one another's bristles and the shoes split open like mouths complete with teeth. Finally the camera pulls back to reveal two phthisic piles of exhausted mush gasping for breath with tongues lying slack and glass eyes staring upward. The dismembered tongue is a persistent symbolic metaphor in Švankmajer's vocabulary. It is an uncanny signifier of how humanity defines itself through language. When the tongue is ripped from the mouth of man, he is reduced to his primitive origins. Švankmajer is illustrating the weakness of language and defending the integrity of the image.

Essentially Švankmajer is highlighting the caution with which we must approach a societal construct of the magnitude of language. Erich Fromm highlights the inherent conditions of brainwashing in language, arguing that this is something that can only occur in humans. (1997, p.266) *Dimensions of Dialogue* is a critique of society's dependence on the categorization of the material and natural world. Švankmajer shows us a 'language of abjection of which the writer is both subject and victim, witness and topple.' (Kristeva, 1982, p.206)

Švankmajer's *The Lesson of Faust* draws on Marlowe's *Faust*, Goethe's *Faust*, the Czech Faust puppet play, Gounod's *Faust* and the more obscure Grabbe. Švankmajer conceived the film as simultaneously making use of multiple

¹³ The repetition of essentially Svankmajeresque objects is a characteristic of his films. The tongue, whether dismembered or attached to a new owner, appears in many of his films such as *A Quiet Week in a House*, *Something of Alice*, *Darkness-Light-Darkness* and most recently in *Lunatic*

languages. The dialogue would switch between the different tongues depending on which Faust was being used for a particular scene. The film would have been in English, Latin, Czech and German but the producers balked at this idea and instead the film was completed with Czech as its language. Švankmajer's original concept recalls the story of *The Tower of Babel*¹⁴ which tells of how the human race, originally united under one tongue, attempt to build a tower and reach Heaven. God confuses the people's tongues so that no person can communicate with another and the tower could not reach completion. The story functions as an explanation for the wealth of languages and races in the world. Švankmajer's *Faust* would probably have been incomprehensible to even the most talented linguists. This would serve to disorientate the viewer reinforcing the overall theme of man's helplessness by highlighting the finite extent of every viewer's knowledge. The film is a dark critique of post modernity and the direction in which society is travelling. Švankmajer has said

When any civilisation feels its end is growing near, it returns to its beginnings and looks to see whether the myths on which it is founded can be interpreted in new ways, which would give them a new energy and ward off the impending catastrophe. The myth of Faust is one of the key myths of this civilisation, and its interpretations are numerous. My Faust is intended to be one of these interpretative returns.¹⁵

Sade was also concerned with 'confronting language with its own limits, with what is in a sense a "nonlanguage"(violence that does not speak, eroticism that remains unspoken)' (Deleuze, 1989, p.22)

¹⁴ The story is found in Genesis 11:1-9

¹⁵ <http://www.illumina.co.uk/svank/films/faust/faust.html>



In *A Quiet Week in a House* Švankmajer's replaces the keys and letters on a typewriter with screws. This not only eliminates the possibility of communication as the machine is rendered useless, but it also transforms the typewriter into a symbol of torture. While the performances in each of the other rooms are even more bizarre, they are also grotesque and in particularly extreme instances they are laced with the abject. A dismembered tongue bursts forth from the wall and licks a basin full of dishes clean before committing suicide in an antique mincing machine, yet what is discharged is not the minced meat of the tongue but rolled up newspaper fragments. The human body, already dismembered, is survived by disparate, useless words. Similarly in *Jabberwocky* and *Something of Alice* the foregrounding of Lewis Carroll's revealingly irrational, yet linguistically logical writings uncover profound paradoxes not only in speech and language but also in the complexities of the individualist understanding of the world. One of the most significant statements is placed at the very beginning of *Something from Alice*, 'Now you must close your eyes otherwise you won't see anything!' pointing to a reflection inwards to the self and the unconscious.

These films observe that human beings are not rational entities with linear thought processes and that any ideological attempt to define, categorise and judge an individual or object is an over simplification; just as the logic of language cannot possibly convey the complexity of human thought or emotion. Albert Camus states, 'what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for

clarity whose call echoes in the human heart.' (1923, p. 161) ' the absurd is not in man (if such a metaphor could have meaning) nor in the world, but in their presence together.' (Camus, 1923, p. 165) Švankmajer observes the beauty of our failure to find meaning. As Walter Benjamin explains in a reflection on the work Švankmajer's precursor, Franz Kafka, its peculiar attraction 'is the purity and beauty of a failure.' (Benjamin, 1969, p.145)

Confronting Animation

Švankmajer's films employ animation in a confrontational challenging manner. The animation is masterfully executed yet there is an undeniable emphasis on the illusion of the technique. These works elude a mimetic representation of the everyday, yet they do not adhere to the logic of everyday reality, but neither are they works of fantasy. Švankmajer treats objects as fully animate beings and he renders human beings as mechanized puppets. His fundamental belief in the animism of everyday objects is at the core and his films and narratives are extractions of a subjective confession from these objects. This philosophy and method posits a unique perspective on reality: reality is considered from the objects point of view. The films evince a renewed consideration of temporality. All of this makes for a subversive animation of the inanimate, which eludes classification because it communicates an autonomous reality.

Švankmajer has developed a unique method and style of working, which is simultaneously marvellous and horrifying. His apocalyptic vision is intricately rendered using one of cinema's most time consuming techniques. Yet even his use of animation is unconventional, as he interweaves manipulated objects with real time footage and real actors. Animation is just one of a vast array of media used by Švankmajer to realize his cinematic vision. He does not allow himself to be constrained by technique. His unique style is partially due to his study of stage design and the direction of puppetry rather than any formal training in film and technology. His most recent films, *Little Otesanek* (2000) and *Lunatics* (2005) are increasingly realized through live action with animation supporting the central plot in some of the more surreal scenes rather than constituting the best part of the film. However Švankmajer's vision found full expression in his first feature film, *Something of Alice*¹⁶. It is the archetypal Švankmajer film, combining the animation of objects, people, surrealism, horror, the uncanny and eroticism in a dream-like alchemy. Švankmajer takes his impetus from Lewis Carroll's original story, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, but Švankmajer's interpretation is

¹⁶ *Something of Alice* was released at the time of the Velvet Revolution in the Czech Republic

deeply personal. Švankmajer had not read Carroll's novel since he was a child. Rather than merely illustrate the original story, he uses it as a vehicle for the communication and expression of his unconscious mind. Relying on the distortions of his memory for inspiration rather than the actual text. His aesthetic project is a mode of self-analysis whereby he expounds deep-rooted and intensely personal concerns from his unconscious. The depth of his engagement touches on fundamental human concerns.



Something of Alice acts as a paradigm for the preceding argument. Švankmajer realizes his anxieties and obsessions in the nightmarish wonderland of the film. The story accommodates the uncanny, the abject and the surreal, with emphasis given to the disjointed literary dream narrative through the various introjected images of Alice's mouth, which underscore all the dialogue.¹⁷

¹⁷ This is rendered with an added, unexpected level of surrealism in the dubbed English language version of the film.

The root of the word animate is 'Animare', a Latin verb, which means 'to give life to something'.¹⁸ Animation is a technique of filmmaking that consists of manipulating objects or still images between each frame 'providing an illusion of movement, which has not been directly recorded in the conventional photographic sense.' (Wells, 1999, p.10) Although it has strict boundaries and constrictions of its own, animation can be a very free creative process over which the artist can exercise greater control than live action filming. The technique of stop frame animation deviates almost impulsively from reality: time is condensed, movement is exaggerated and the extent of the manipulation causes the image to become removed from reality. Animation reveals a world that is more adequately described as hyper real. This is especially true in Švankmajer's case because of his surreal and extraordinary treatment of real objects and people. However Švankmajer's world is realistically grounded in that it follows a definite logic and physics of its own. The nature of the process is extremely repetitive and at times obsessive. Švankmajer's work is intentionally process referential. It implicates the artist and his assistants but they remain hidden. Frederic Jameson observes that

...in animation, as in later experimental video, the Lacanian overtones of this language of material signifiers is inescapably completed by the omnipresent force of human praxis itself; suggesting thereby an active materialism of matter or materiality itself as some inert support. (Jameson, 1991, p.77)

This is important when we consider Švankmajer's aim as an exploration of the unconscious. The artist is tangible and omnipresent yet elusive and undefined. This parallels the notion of the unconscious mind metaphorically. He uses the repetition inherent in the animation process as a motif and he implicates the unseen force of the artist through staccato animation¹⁹ and the animator's fingerprints on the clay in films like *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1980) and *Dimensions of Dialogue*. This style emphasizes the unsettling nature of the

¹⁸ When I first read this I understood it in a very literal sense; rather than instilling life in inanimate objects, I thought that this definition was a pun; mocking the perseverance of the animator and the length of time spent on every single frame of each second. This way of working totally consumes an artist forcing him to become extremely obsessive.

¹⁹ Švankmajer's animation is perceptively less smooth than other animator's such as Aardman studios, Disney or even the Quay Brothers.

illusion and the temporal displacement that is in effect in Švankmajer's work. It is, however, in a way a more honest use of the cinema than the live action films, which we accept as standard and 'real'. The 'exact adaptation resembles magic and the object that behaves perfectly becomes no better than an hallucination.' (Winnicott, 1985, p.12) Švankmajer's illusion celebrates its own incongruity, jarring expectations. The viewer encounters a parallel universe and must experience the rules of this world in much the same way as a child: committing various signs to memory, which connect to reality but which also function autonomously. Animation is not only an adequate vehicle for Švankmajer's own brand of surrealism but it serves as the foundation for a variety of unusual elements he uses to explore his unconscious. Michael O'Pray observes that 'Serious discussion of animation barely existed in western film theory until very recently.' (1995, p.49) Švankmajer is conscientiously working with peripheral, unfamiliar themes, techniques and imagery.

Švankmajer has developed a relationship with objects that most normal directors would have with their actors and actresses. He even approaches people and their acting with the same extensive control he uses to manipulate various objects and in some instances such as in scenes from *Food* and *Something of Alice* he animates his actors in interaction or metamorphoses. Švankmajer's work is an interpretation of the animism of everyday objects and artefacts. He believes that 'that objects have their own passive lives which they've soaked up, as it were, from the situations they've been in, and from the people who have made them.' (Wells, 1998, p.90) For him 'objects are more alive than people, more permanent and more expressive' and that enables Švankmajer to create an autonomous reality, which is connected to our own through the conduit of his unconscious mind. Švankmajer believes that these objects are alive before he interacts with them. The animation of the object is merely an extraction of its memory. It is an illustration of its passive animism. Švankmajer's aesthetic project parallels Heidegger's existential philosophy. If Švankmajer's process is placed within the margins of Heidegger's concept then the filmmaker can be defined as the Dasein, who is interested in his own being, and the inanimate article possesses an objective presence. The animation of the object transforms it into a tool for

communicating its own being. The viewer of his films not only gains a glimpse into the Dasein mind but also into the surreal objective presence of inanimate objects.

Dasein's world frees entities which are not only quite distinct from equipment and Thing ... These entities are neither present-to-hand nor ready-to-hand; on the contrary, they are *like* the very Dasein which frees them, in that *they are there too, and there with it.* (Heidegger, 1978, p.154)

It is the depth of this personal investigation in Švankmajer's opus that lends it a universal appeal. This voyeurism into the unconscious is echoed in Alice's stalking of the white rabbit. At different times she is shown withdrawn in the shadows spying on him with eager curiosity and any attempt to interact with the elusive illusory rabbit results in his hurried escape.



The unconscious is the realm of the forgotten and the repressed. Therefore, in his communication of this mysterious void, Švankmajer utilizes forgotten, useless and dilapidated objects and environments. It is within the outmoded and the misunderstood that we can conceive of an unreality because they have lost their rationality. Their resilience to unconscious projected desires crumbles. These objects are rejected by society. Nobody owns them. They become free-floating entities. In short Švankmajer is free to speculate and construct an exploration of the lives of these objects, which may then in turn assume a symbolic connection with the unconscious: 'Decay: privileged place of mingling, of the contamination of life by death, of begetting and of ending.' (Kristeva, 1982, p.149) The obsolete is therefore a foundation for a philosophy that transcends the real and

Švankmajer's films become signs of a form of unreality. As Vratislav Effenberger²⁰ suggests, these films exist on 'the border of reality and fiction, on that elastic boundary on which reality becomes illusion and illusion becomes reality.' (Dryje, 2004, p.87)

In general the objects that Švankmajer incorporates into his films reflect the surrealist concern with the outmoded object and 'romantic ruin'. The romantic ruin is perceived as a 'mixing of the historical and the natural'. (O'Pray, 1995, p.64) The ruin provides an 'alternative aesthetics of dissonance and peculiar associations' (Edensor, 2005, p.76) It functions mnemonically through the natural temporalities evidenced by decay. 'Charged with an evident transience, ruins of all sorts have long symbolized death and decay, the fragility of life and of the material world.' (Edensor, 2005, p.139) In *Something of Alice* the 'romantic ruin' takes the form of the various rooms and stairwells that Alice scurries around in her pursuit for the white rabbit. The rooms are extremely similar although the objects present and the scenarios that ensue within the four walls interchange. In some instances it is subtly noticeable that Švankmajer has used the exact same room for a variety of scenes²¹. The subtle uncanny repetition of the same or similar rooms and stairwells serves as reminder that the film is exploring the unconscious mind and therefore the audience is not supposed to comprehend any other movement than a descent. This descent is illustrated through Alice's plunge



²⁰ Effenberger (1923-86) was the postwar leader of the surrealists in Prague and a firm supporter of Švankmajer's work.

²¹ The small door within the larger door is seen fleetingly in the room where Alice finds the white rabbits home.

into the drawer of a writing desk²², her subsequent passage down a catacomb or cellar-like tunnel, her journey downwards in the elevator, her next fall through the ceiling of a room onto a pile of dry leaves, and the shrinking of her body into the figure of a porcelain doll.

The narration at the beginning of *Something of Alice* indicates that we are about to see ‘a film for children...Perhaps...but I forgot’. This stream of consciousness recitation indicates the peripheral area the film occupies and the short sentence already points out three areas of indeterminacy: the subjective mentality of a child, the ambiguous transitional period between childhood and adulthood, and the incongruent sphere of memory. This indeterminacy is a tool functioning in a similar way to Švankmajer’s editing technique in *Something of Alice* and indeed many other Švankmajer films, which is reminiscent of Eisenstein’s montage that counteracts the illusion of ordered normality. Images and scenarios are juxtaposed which serve to disorient rather than passively guide the observer. Nothing is ever resolved for the viewer. The juxtaposition of asynchronous scenarios allows the film to work on in the imagination long after the projector is switched off. The film has its own exclusive logic and structure but the audience is given the task of constructing a narrative and/or meaning. André Tarkovsky²³ observes

Through poetic connections feeling is heightened and the spectator is made more active...The usual logic, that of linear sequentiality, is uncomfortably like the proof of a geometry theorem. As a method it is comparably less fruitful artistically than the possibilities opened up by associative linking... (1986, p.20)

²² Possibly a reference to Carroll’s obscure riddle from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, voiced by the March hare ‘Why is a raven like a writing desk?’

²³ Tarkovsky was born in 1932, making him an almost exact contemporary of Švankmajer’s. His film *Stalker* (1979) shares a similar aesthetic with Švankmajer’s work. The protagonists of *Stalker* are placed in the dilapidated surroundings of ‘The Zone’, which bear a resemblance to Švankmajer’s predilection for the Romantic ruin and the obsolete object.

Švankmajer's films make use of Czechoslovakia's long and rich tradition of marionette theatre and puppet animation. This not only differentiates his work from other studios and animators (most importantly the American mainstream animation) but it also functions mimetically. The puppets function ostensibly as human beings but, as in the case of the mad hatter, they are ascribed the mechanical processes of society and industry. Švankmajer has said that he resorts to puppets at moments when he feels threatened; 'Thus I make my own Golems that are designed to protect me from the pogroms of reality.' (Dryje, 2004, p.42) The Hatter is complete with strings and ticking clocks referencing the various ways we can experience time but he is a reductive empty persona. This figurine



represents a complacent simplified understanding of reality. He is un-phased

when the white rabbit cuts off his head and he exorcises a magical control over his apparent superior when he pulls the squirming rabbit from a hat like a furtive conjurer. Eileen Blumenthal perceives that Švankmajer's 'ravaged-looking characters, presented in fractured images in ruptured time and space become emblems of disorder itself being further shattered.' (2005, pp.156-7) Švankmajer makes a subtle reference to traditional Russian puppetry towards the climax of the film with the cutout playing cards, fabricated by his wife Eva Švankmajerova²⁴, and he constructs awkward Bosch like hybrid creatures from skulls, glass eyeballs, stuffed animals, theatrical costumes and destitute objects.

²⁴ Eva Švankmajerova was also a member of the Czech surrealist group. She collaborated on a number of Švankmajer's films as art director but she also worked as a painter and ceramic artist. She died on the 20th of October 2005

Czech culture traditionally used the puppet theatre as a ‘pedagogical tool’. In this sense it was used as a tool to ‘defend national identity’ and define Czech culture for children. (Bogatyrev, 1923, p. 88) Švankmajer’s use of the puppet is varied and ambiguous, and therefore far from didactic. The puppet is a defensive mechanism for him, one that defines and contains him. The constant substitution of puppet for human and human for puppet, which proliferates Švankmajer’s films, appearing in *The Lesson of Faust*, *Don Juan* (1970) and *Something of Alice*, makes these films’ ‘moribund world seep from the patently make-believe into a world closer to the one the film’s viewers inhabit.’ (Blumenthal, 2005, p. 253)

‘The viewer of Švankmajer’s films rediscovers something which provokes fear, an endless possibility, the magical power of metamorphosis.’ (Dryje, 2004, p.93) Švankmajer’s use of metamorphosis is similar to the unfortunate Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s short story *The Metamorphosis*, the man transformed into a giant beetle, ‘both he and his society are a logically impossible hybrid compounded from mutually exclusive existences.’

(Hancil, 1991, p.6) The viewer is constantly reminded of an ubiquitous sense of self, ever-changing, undergoing a destruction and a renewal. The individual is permeated by the decay of the material world. The environment that Alice inhabits is a decrepit interior, which is without windows until the croquet match with the Queen. When she nears the end of her ostensible dream, the window is a view to reality, just as the climbing stairs represent an ascent from the core



psyche. The core is the point where Alice encounters the miniature house or home that grows in size to accommodate her. However there seems to exist here some extreme form of resistance. The rabbit throws crockery and kitchen utensils at the protagonist, stinging her knee with pain, while attempting to feed an insatiable baby who will not stop crying. The baby consumes the bottles of milk with shocking speed, a precursor for the voracious wooden stump baby *Little Otesanek*. Finally, in desperation, the rabbit throws the baby at Alice. The baby subsequently metamorphoses into a pig. Švankmajer is introducing the uncanny or unhomely (unheimlich) core in the form of an impossibly small house. This core reveals not only a repressed infantile nucleus but also a dichotomy between animal and infantile. The exaggerated sounds contradict the imagery, switching between the nasal screaming of the piglet and the wails of a newborn.



Švankmajer subtly alludes to various psychoanalytic interpretations of latent eroticism that ostensibly proliferate throughout Lewis Carroll's (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Carroll is the epitome of erotic

repression in the Victorian age and Švankmajer feels that he ‘is an illustration of the fact that children are better understood by paedophiliacs [sic] than by pedagogues.’ (Švankmajer, 1987) The extreme close up on the pre-pubescent female protagonist’s mouth, which is spliced into the film every time there is any dialogue reveals the film’s, and the book’s, erotic undertones. The viewer is thrust into an intensely erotic and personal space with Alice. There are various understated instances where the child’s bare thigh is revealed in a seemingly accidental manner, such as when she falls through an antique metal bath into a descending elevator. ‘Alice grows and shrinks, suggesting phallic significance’. (Nickel, 2002, p.27) The doors of normal size allegedly represent ‘adult women. These are disregarded by the dreamer and the interest is centred on the little door, which symbolizes the female child’. (Nickel, 2002, p.27) This undercurrent of eroticism runs through all of Švankmajer’s work. It is important precisely because it is not made explicit. Eroticism is nearly always implicated metaphorically, even in *Conspirators of Pleasure*, rather than pornographically. In this way the erotic undertones function as a symbol of sexual repression in the unconscious mind.

When Švankmajer’s wonderland assumes its most malevolent proportions, the various Bosch-like creatures, led by the white rabbit, attack Alice. The sequence subtly resembles the famous ‘here’s Johnny’ sequence from Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980). The rabbit breaks through the tiny door at the base of a huge door, poking his head through the hole similar to the grotesque way Nicholson forces his head through the smashed door. Kubrick investigated Bruno Bettelheim’s *The uses of Enchantment* for some of the insane utterances of Jack Torrance, such as the reference to the big bad wolf when he is hacking down the door.



Unless we again begin to tell fairy tales and ghost stories before going to sleep and recounting our dreams upon waking, nothing

more is to be expected of our Western civilization.²⁵ (Švankmajer, 2006)

Bettelheim illustrates the child's need for fairytales and especially magic. He explains, 'Children's dreams are very simple: wishes are fulfilled and anxieties are given tangible form.' (Bettelheim, 1991, p.54) This could elucidation of the child's dream could double as a description of *Something of Alice*, and in most of Švankmajer's work. Švankmajer explains that 'one of the very basic myths of this civilization is concealed in the story of "Little Otik": man's revolt against nature and the tragic dimension of this revolt.' (Steinhart, 2002)

In order to attain authentic lyrical existence the poetry of cinema demands, more than any other, a traumatic and violent disequilibrium veering towards concrete irrationality. (Salvador Dalí) (O'Pray, 1995, p.62)

Švankmajer's philosophy adheres to Dalí's declaration on the nature of cinema. Nevertheless Švankmajer's uniquely distressing and cruelly sadistic film world stretches Dalí's foresight to breaking point. He creates a world that is wholly irrational and illogical that finds its only comparison in the landscapes of dreams. His subscription to a pure, yet personal, form of surrealism, which grew out of Dadaism, and the philosophies of Andre Breton points to a fundamental rejection of logic and the politics of everyday life. Švankmajer is also an avid advocate of Dalí's notion of 'concrete irrationality'. 'Surrealism exists in reality not beside it.' (Švankmajer Documentary)

The image near the beginning of *Something of Alice* of a light bulb accompanied by the heightened sound of humming electricity represents a transition, which has resonating personal connotations for Švankmajer. It is a symbolic metaphor that recalls his

...first feeling of depression and despair... We entered the apartment and there was a bare light bulb blinking down from the kitchen ceiling. My mother quickly ran to darken the

²⁵ <http://cinematexas.org/old/svankmajer.html>

window...face to face with the darkness beyond the window I realized my own mortality. (Dryje, 2004, p.112)

Though not immediately apparent to the viewer this image has a deeper implication for the director. It is obvious from the meditative stare that Alice directs at this object that it has some profound meaning from her. It acts as the boundary, visually and audibly between two realities in the film as the next sound and image is of the creaking animated rabbit come to life as Alice apparently passes into a dream. This may even be a dream within a dream as the audience was already presented with a sequence where Alice sits beside a stream with her sister. Alice's sister is the only other human character in the film although she is attributed with the detached malevolence of an adult. Her head is strategically cropped and she cruelly slaps Alice when she looks for pictures in the book on her lap. It is difficult to distinguish whether any of these realities exist outside the dream sphere; the first shot is beautiful and essentially nostalgic, at least until Alice is reprimanded giving it the quality of a memory. The ambiguity here is intentional and it actively disorients and simultaneously fascinates the viewer.

Švankmajer's work is comparable not only with a dream but also with a terrible drug-induced hallucination. Švankmajer has ruminated, 'Perhaps drugs are no more than a preserved and concentrated form of imagination. But the imagination also has a predilection for cruelty'²⁶. Švankmajer describes his experience with drugs as

...a kind of regression to infancy and a feeling of utter helplessness. Then there were stroboscope-like effects: when I raised my arm the movement would be broken up into a series of static images, like a time-lapse shot, with a different colour for each phase. (Švankmajer, 2001)

²⁶ Švankmajer's describes an experience that he and his wife had in 1972. They both volunteered for experimental doses of LSD and tomato' gas. Švankmajer's body rejected the drug and he had a severe attack of paranoia and anxiety. (The Guardian, Friday October 19 2001)

Švankmajer describes his experience as horrific and at one stage he ‘had an utterly ‘realistic’ experience of drowning.’ (Švankmajer, 2001) He does not, however, rely on drugs for his inspiration; instead he draws it from his dreams and childhood fantasies.

His work maintains a hyper-reality that is reminiscent of Jean Baudrillard’s discussion of the ‘Simulacra’. Baudrillard perceived the simulacra as a substitution of ‘signs of the real for the real itself’. (1983, p.4) ‘The Simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth-it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.’ (1983, p.1) This is especially true of the unconscious and therefore of Švankmajer’s cinematic reality. The unconscious only exists synthetically through mediation between humans. Empirical perception never actually enters into the one’s experience of another’s unconscious self. Švankmajer’s representation of various unconscious concepts and emotions is the tangible truth of his unconscious. It is his unconscious self as far as the audience can actually experience it. Yet Baudrillard also deliberates over ‘the murderous capacity of images, murderers of the real’ (1983, p.10), and in this sense Švankmajer not only successfully represents his unconscious, he destroys it.



Conclusion

This thesis has been concerned with an investigation of Jan Švankmajer's aesthetic illumination of the unconscious in his films, which expose the unconscious from a deeply personal, subjective perspective. The Unconscious mind is elusive and mysterious. The uncanny in his films acts as a conduit between the interior of the psyche and external reality, releasing fundamental infantile repression from the unconscious. Repression is projected onto objects in the external world: revealing the magical animistic properties subjectively perceived as inherent in objects from early infancy, before the psyche is clearly demarcated from external reality. The alternate reality illuminated in Švankmajer's films has its roots in the existential anxiety established in childhood: it is located on the asymptotic point where imagination and reality coincide. Rather than patronizing the child pedagogically, like many animated films, they function on the similar plane of thought to the infant's mind. The films are sublimations of fear and the destructive instincts, in an attempt to define and subsequently assuage anxiety. Existential anxiety is a universal and uniquely human phenomenon: the awareness man is burdened with is the cause of a psychological dislocation. Civilization and its constructs are called into question. Through the medium of film Švankmajer postulates that the spectacular failure of language is its inability to accommodate and communicate the complexity of the mind and human emotion. The image as it appears in animation and film represents an honest interpretation of the human mind while simultaneously bearing witness to its overwhelming magnitude. Outmoded techniques and motifs symbolize and illustrate the repressions of society and the unconscious. Švankmajer creates a unique and intricate simulacrum of his unconscious mind, exposing its inherent mystery and cruelty.

From the outset of this thesis, Freud's concept of the uncanny was used as the foundation for uncovering the core infantile repression conveyed in Švankmajer's films. Winnicott's theory of 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena' provides an explanation for the animism of objects as a regression to the transitional period when an infant's subjective perception is transformed into an

objective one. Anxiety and the reading of animism in objects are fundamental to every human's initial understanding of reality. Kristeva's writings on abjection justify the inherent food loathing, cannibalism and extraordinary destruction found in Švankmajer's work. This cyclical annihilation and reconstitution of objects through art is an authentication of reality and the apparent devastation is an attempt to release tension accumulated through man's continuous engagement with the impossible void of the unconscious. The films are a form of catharsis for the artist and the effect on the viewer is similar: we are confronted and challenged with destruction as a means of liberation. Švankmajer's distrust of language reveals a distinctly post-modern awareness of the limitations of art and especially society. *Something of Alice* is established as a simulacrum of the unconscious and within this film we can discern two archetypal elements of the unconscious: infantile repression and animism. The juxtaposition of Švankmajer's method of 'concrete irrationality' with Lewis Carroll's illogical, dreamlike narrative provides the viewer with the unique opportunity of experiencing a powerful and enduring dream in a wakeful state: the unconscious is exposed and yet still eludes understanding.

Švankmajer's films are forceful acts of the imagination, which argue for the rejection of contemporary civilization and a return to the primitive origins of humanity. Švankmajer has said that anthropocentrism

...will not be the first illusion, which Mankind will have to...abandon in the course of civilisation. Copernicus has long before deprived it of the illusion that Earth is the centre of the universe and relatively recently Freud deprived Mankind of the illusion that it is the supreme ruler of his thought and action. Though I concede that the loss of the illusion of anthropocentrism will be the most painful and it will have far more serious consequences.²⁷

He argues that this is the only logical course for civilization and its only alternative is self-annihilation. Švankmajer successfully creates a reality out of his unconscious desires that is both fascinating and confrontational. This thesis

²⁷ <http://www.illumin.co.uk/svank/script/texts/leadrole.html>

provides an elucidation of this disturbing and unexpected world: a world that mirrors and complements our own. Švankmajer brings light to the dark recesses of the human mind.

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