Jan Švankmajer's Adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe

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TOMORROW COULD BRING SALVATION: JAN ŠVANKMAJER'S ADAPTATIONS OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

Animation, as a branch of cinema, has never been accorded the respect given to other kinds of filmmaking, and as a result has never been as carefully researched as have these other cinematic modes. In an understudied art, Jan Švankmajer, the Czech filmmaker (specializing in stop-motion animation and pixilation), is even less well-known or discussed.(1) The nature of his films, which are always disturbing and frequently downright repulsive, often leads critics to discuss them in terms of only these surface elements, using them as examples of Švankmajer's strangeness. Even more often, however, critics and filmgoers choose not to discuss his films at all, as if the images and the ideas they evoke are too disgusting - or painful - to think about.

Švankmajer's animation is unlike most worldwide animation and is particularly dissimilar to mainstream American animation.(2) His work displays the varied influences of Dadaism, Surrealism, Lewis Carroll, Edgar Allan Poe, Eisenstein, Buñuel, Fellini, and traditional Czech puppet theatre. He is especially known for pixilating (animating three-dimensional objects and even people through stop-motion cinematography) such diverse objects as dead animals, broken glass and raw meat; as Terrence Rafferty once remarked, "Švankmajer gets directly to the root meaning of animation - literally breathing life into the lifeless."(3) He avoids dialogue in most of his work and often incorporates familiar children's tales in violent, deadly, frightening visions of a world that we uncomfortably recognize as part of our everyday lives. Rafferty put it this way: "Things that won't behave normally are scarier than words that won't, and those things are the material of our ordinary lives, the stuff we manipulate happily everyday, the favourite toys we surround ourselves with for comfort, the effect is chilling, claustrophobic."(4) Likewise, Caryn James points out, "Childhood toys and games are Mr. Švankmajer's favourite vehicles for his playful meditations on death."(5) These are neither the happy images of Gumby and Pokey nor are they the anthropomorphized Muppets. These are obviously inanimate objects that are coerced to move through the phi-phenomenon and the flickering of light and shadow on a screen. Rafferty explains, "When the figures of our imagination take on a life of their own we're somehow confined - as helpless as dreamers who can't wake or madmen backed into corners flailing at phantoms."(6) Through these images and experiences, Švankmajer's films have the feel of ritual, like the heavy somberness of a funeral, the forcefulness of abandonment, and the fear that one day we might all realize that our own performances will end violently, bleakly, blindly or, worse, mundanely.

His work is fascinating and worth a deeper look for a number of reasons. The one in which we are most interested here is Švankmajer's ability to appropriate narratives from a variety of Western cultures and make them uniquely "Švankmajerian" and distinctly Czech narratives. Most obviously, these narratives (adapted from the works of such authors as Poe, Lewis Carroll, and Goethe) were often turned by Švankmajer into commentaries on the politics of the pre-1989 communist Czechoslovakia. But less obvious, and more interesting, is the way in which Švankmajer makes these imported, non-Czech narratives *stylistically* Czech.(7)

In this paper we are concerned primarily with Švankmajer's adaptations of Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum* (as *The Pendulum, The Pit and Hope*, 1983) and *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1980). In these two short films, Švankmajer turns the Nineteenth Century words of American author Edgar Allan Poe into darkly Eastern European images of communist Czechoslovakia of the late Twentieth Century. Švankmajer adapts American stories into narratives redolent of the history of Czechoslovakia and rich with the traditions of Czech culture, art, film and especially puppetry. As we will see, Švankmajer retains the imagery and horror of Poe's works, but puts them in different contexts and uses his own style and techniques to give them new meanings. Discussing *Alice*, his "interpretation" of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Švankmajer pointed out that "My *Alice* could not be an adaptation of Carroll's, it is an interpretation of it fermented by my own childhood, with all its particular obsessions and anxieties."(8) Likewise, Švankmajer's works based on the short stories of Poe should be seen as interpretations, not strict adaptations.

To begin with, it may seem odd for a puppet animator, much less a Czech puppet animator, to even think of adapting such works as those of Poe. But, despite the problems of translating work that is as subjective as these two short stories are, the two artists have at least one thing in common: they both are exceptionally familiar with horror. As film critic Anthony Lane points out, ”There are always moments in a Švankmajer movie when the wish to avert your gaze is only just overcome by the horrified need to see what happens next.”(9) Even the most ”innocent” of Švankmajer's works can be quite unsettling; when combined with Poe's prose, Švankmajer's visions are indeed discomforting, to say the least.

Švankmajer uses different strategies in adapting each of these two works, and for different reasons. Of the two, his adaptation of ”The Pit and the Pendulum” is the more faithful to its source. Still, Švankmajer takes liberties with the original text, beginning with the title, which he as changed to *The Pendulum, the Pit and Hope*; this title in itself is an ironic comment on life in Czechoslovakia. This film actually consists of a combination of Poe's short story and *The Torture of Hope*, a short story by the Nineteenth Century Symbolist writer, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam.(10) As we will see, the influence of the latter work features more prominently at the end of Švankmajer's film.

The first difference that becomes apparent is the omission of much of the first part of the story; Švankmajer's version begins with the bound protagonist being led by several monks. Leaving out the exploration of the dungeon room itself, the film then cuts to the protagonist tied to the table, with the pendulum above beginning to swing slowly. In a major departure from the original, in which the protagonist has no control over the pendulum at all, and in fact wishes he could speed its descent, Švankmajer's hero soon learns, to his horror, that the actions of his one free hand can, in fact, cause the blade to descend more quickly. Through an elaborate system of pulleys and blades, he can cause sand to drain more quickly from a large bag. This sandbag, which is slowly losing its contents, is connected to the pendulum and as the sand drains, the blade is lowered. Therefore, the protagonist is given a certain amount of power over the situation; unfortunately for him, he can only make it worse.

It is not difficult to see how this situation can be related to life in an oppressive totalitarian regime such as that of Czechoslovakia at the time. Certainly the citizens were not helpless; but actions taken tended to make the situation worse, and very little could be done to improve matters (as in, for example, the ”Prague Spring” of 1968 and the subsequent invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union and most of the Warsaw Pact Allies). This theme continues in Švankmajer's film; after freeing himself by putting food (which looks far more like faecal matter than anything edible) on the ropes binding him to the table so that rats will chew through the ropes, the protagonist faces not walls closing in on him, as in Poe's short story, but an elaborate, hellish machine, with fire-spitting demons devouring puppets. This relentless machine, moving toward him on a track, forces the hero backwards toward the pit; if he tries to touch it, blades emerge, cutting his hands. Once again, the protagonist is able to take action to alter his fate; he takes the plate that held his food and, jamming it between the machine and the track, stops the machine's forward motion before it can push him over the edge.

We now have another deviation from Poe's story, and the grafting onto the film of the ending of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's ”The Torture of Hope” (identified in the film as simply ”Hope”). The hero makes his way through tunnels and caverns, passing racks on which other victims are being tortured by black-robed priests. Unnoticed by them, he finally finds daylight. Again, it is important to note that the protagonist saves himself; he has no saviour, no *deus ex machina*, as in Poe's story, in which the protagonist is saved at the last second by a rescuer. No, Švankmajer's hero saves himself...only to find himself once again captured by a faceless, black-robed priest, who welcomes him back with the words, ”But my son, tomorrow could bring salvation...and you wanted to leave?” Švankmajer ends his adaptation with statistics on the numbers of deaths suffered during the Inquisition.

Unlike Poe's story, Švankmajer's film relies on imagery, not prose, to convey its sense of horror. Retaining the subjectivity of the original, the story shows us what the protagonist sees, but doesn't tell us what he thinks or feels (hence the omission of the exploration of the chamber in the dark). To increase the impact of the visuals, Švankmajer includes details missing from the story, such as a rat sliced in two by the pendulum's blade, the hellish details of the machine, and torture with evil-looking instruments. In addition, although very little of this film is pixilated (in comparison to most of Švankmajer's films), what little there is (especially of the

rats) increases the surreal quality of the *mise-en-scène* and enhances the sense of horror. As in Švankmajer's later, feature-length films, the presence of pixilation in the context of live-action creates an uncomfortable mix. Speaking of *Alice*, Maureen Furniss points out that "It is difficult to say just what makes the images in the film somewhat uncanny, but clearly the linking of the 'real world' and animated imagery tends to encourage the effect."[(11)]

However, the most important difference is certainly the altered conclusion, adding the ending of Villiers de L'Isle's "The Torture of Hope." Whereas Poe creates a sense of irony with the improbable rescue of the hero, Švankmajer creates a sense of Czechoslovakian despair and helplessness with his recapture. For Švankmajer, the irony is in the title, *The Pendulum, the Pit and Hope*, for in this world, there is no hope; things only get worse, no matter how we struggle.[(12)]

To fully understand the context in which Švankmajer made this film we need to understand the importance of puppetry to Czech film history, and Švankmajer in particular. Puppet shows, dating back to the seventeenth century in Czech lands (then a part of the Austrian Habsburg empire), traditionally dealt with political issues and often were critical of the government.[(13)] The people of the former Czechoslovakia have experienced and interacted with this public performance art form for centuries, and many of their folk tales and fairy tales revolve around this popular tradition. The political significance of puppet shows is pointed out by Ronald Holloway, who observes that they were often an expression of protest and revolt.[(14)] The people used this form to convey their displeasure with the government for hundreds of years, and to express and build consensus without risking their freedom further. Puppet theatre, as social protest, is easily disguised as playful rather than more dangerous forms of revolt. For such an artist as Švankmajer, the puppet film is an obvious choice, and is used to good effect in *The Pendulum, the Pit and Hope.* Note also that the end of the film, criticizing not the Czechoslovak state but the Spanish Inquisition, further distances the film from direct commentary on the Communist government. The point, however, is taken; we doubt that anyone really thinks that Švankmajer is directing his outrage at the Spanish Inquisition.

Švankmajer's experience with oppressive governments began early in his career. Uhde explains:

> Most of Švankmajer's artistic career has coincided with the totalitarian rule in former Czechoslovakia. The Communist regime was not at all interested in encouraging or promoting an artist whose work represented an opposing view to the government's cultural ideology and practice, and was thus barely tolerated by the authorities.[(15)]

Švankmajer's films, in the tradition of puppet theatre, are expressions of protest and revolt against the government; further, they are a site of struggle within the tenants of Surrealism. In this context, O'Pray reports and comments on a remark made by Švankmajer on a BBC program, "to the effect that totalitarianism 'appeals to the lower instincts'...It is an insight which lies at the heart of surrealism itself, and raises the question of the relationship of those instincts to certain forms of twentieth-century artistic practice as well as to malignant political ideologies."[(16)] In other words, Švankmajer sees his surrealistic world view, expressed in his films, as a cultural performance that questions the effect of totalitarian ideology.

It was in this environment that Jan Švankmajer worked. His films, because of their puppet theatre heritage and surrealist form, caused the Communist censors problems in interpretation.[(17)] Švankmajer was able to insert his voice into the dialogue controlled by the State under the guises of the traditional puppet theatre and, often, children's tales that seemed to be made exclusively for young people. Something, however, must have seemed "ideologically wrong" about them. In fact, his political "deviance" was covered somewhat, by the children's tales. Film scholar Anthony Lane jokingly sympathizes with the censors,

> It is hard to conceive of a more frustrating job....[the work] certainly *feels* offensive in all sorts of ways, most of them having nothing to do with ideology, but if you tried to pin down where, precisely, the political danger lay, you would end up tearing your hair out - the ideal tribute to the movie...Finally, in 1973, the censors had enough and forbade Švankmajer to work...And so from 1973 through 1980 Švankmajer "rested," or more specifically, *was* rested.[(18)]

The censors cited the vague reason that he was "ideologically confused," certainly a testament to their inability to actually understand his art. So, Švankmajer's early career was spent under the constant watchful eye of the repressive censors and the State, and perhaps it was working within this totalitarian political

system that contributed the feel of surveillance that his films emit. As Lane suggests, ”Here is the source of the intense watchfulness that prevails in Švankmajer’s movies, a sort of resigned terror that lies beyond politics.”(19) This feeling was almost certainly shared by parts of his audience. This type of perverse paternalistic treatment of the people by the government enhances the irony of using children’s stories to attack the ”parental” State.

Although not based on a children’s story, this is otherwise certainly true of *The Pendulum, the Pit and Hope*. Švankmajer’s adaptation of Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* is of a completely different nature, and is more strictly surreal than it is political. Although this adaptation is not directly influenced by the work of Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, as is *The Pendulum, the Pit and Hope*, its surrealist philosophy (and indeed that of a number of Švankmajer’s films) is reminiscent of the Symbolist philosophy found in the following exchange from Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s play, *Axël*:

> *Samuel*: Science will not suffice. Sooner or later you will end by coming to your knees.
> *Goetze*: Before what?
> *Samuel*: Before the darkness!(20)

This idea, that there is more to our existence than mere science can ever explain, fits nicely with filmmaker’s belief in the sentience of inanimate objects. Švankmajer also feels that science and rationality (at least as practised in today’s world) are the sources of contemporary ”absurdity”: ”Dream, that natural well for the imagination, is being systematically filled in and absurdity asserts itself in its place; an absurdity produced in quantity by our ’scientific,’ ’rational’ systems.”(21)

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, as in *The Pendulum, the Pit and Hope*, Švankmajer feels no special compulsion to remain strictly faithful to Poe’s original. In this film, the most significant departure from Poe is the fact that there are no human characters at all. As a voice-over narrator reads the short story (in Czech), we see inanimate objects, both natural and otherwise, react to, and complement, the prose. Although the house itself is the major ”actor” in this film, mud also plays a major role, forming and reforming itself into shapes and patterns, oozing and moving like some living thing in response to Poe’s poem ”The Haunted Palace,” in which the decay of a palace serves as an allegory for the decay of the mind and body of the protagonist.(22) Tree roots grow, twist, dig into the ground, and reach out, seeking... something. Putrid water gurgles, moves, and bubbles, swallowing anything it can find. The casket itself irrupts into splintered holes, moving silently through the house, seeking something it cannot find.

Figure 1: *The Pendulum, the Pit and Hope* (1983)

The house itself is made of walls that are in a constant state of decay and motion, giving the viewer a feeling not unlike that of watching rotten meat crawling with maggots. Stone surfaces develop holes, cracks and

fissures, gaping like wounds or open, bleeding sores. Finally, as the story and film reach a climax, the house doesn't burn; instead it spews forth its contents, violently vomiting its furniture out its windows and into the fetid swamp water.

As Roger Cardinal has astutely pointed out, Švankmajer "has stripped the original story of any characters and instead, taking Poe's lead, allowed the very materiality of objects and natural matter to express the torment and horror of Roderick Usher."(23) Švankmajer believes that "places, rooms and objects have their own passive lives which they have soaked up, as it were, from the situations they have been in and from the people who made, touched, and lived with them."(24) Švankmajer himself claimed that animation should "let objects speak for themselves," and that his adaptation of *The Fall of the House of Usher* is about "a swamp in motion and the life of stones. And of course horror, unmotivated horror."(25) How better to illustrate Roderick Usher's belief in "the sentience of all vegetable things," and his fear of his house itself, than to animate the inanimate, to bring to life that which is lifeless, in a world devoid of human beings...a world consisting of only nature and that which man has created? We see the *results* of actions - the imprint and sound of the horse's hooves, for example, but neither the horse nor the hooves - but not their causes (in fact, this nicely describes pixilation itself, in which we see the results of human actions - the movement of inanimate objects - but not the actions themselves). And yet, of course, there *is* one human participant - the viewer. Švankmajer often uses subjective camera work in this film, the handheld camera taking the viewer through the swamp, around the stone walls, through the decaying house, implicating the viewer in the mise-en-scene, placing the experience of the fear not in the narrator or in Roderick Usher, but in the viewer, where the fear most properly belongs.

From another point of view, of course, Poe can be dispensed with altogether; the viewer need not be familiar with the original story at all, or understand the Czech narration, to appreciate this film. Švankmajer's works can just as easily be seen as cinematic *tours-de-force*, celebrations of both cinematic form and the world of objects and nature. As Roger Cardinal puts it, in Švankmajer's *The Fall of the House of Usher* "the cracks in the dry earth, the root formation of a tree and the pattern of lightening in the sky can celebrate a momentous coincidence of forms, a synthesis rather less compelling as a moment in the film's Gothic narrative than it is as a freestanding proposition in its own right."(26)

So it is in Švankmajer's Surrealist leanings that we see a conjunction of his aesthetic and political concerns. Švankmajer uses a Surrealist approach in an effort to liberate his audience both psychologically and politically. The oppression they faced from the everyday "realities" of life was compounded by the political repression they also endured. As film scholars Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell explain, Švankmajer's surrealist images are steeped in dark humour that both repulses and engages because they make sense only through the dark connections of the unconscious. In their words:

> In Švankmajer's films, images of fear, cruelty, and frustration exude black humour. Every object has a rich texture and tactile appeal, yet the events follow the illogic of dreams. Slabs of meat slither about; antique dolls are ground up and boiled into soup; faces in old prints stare enigmatically as enraged puppets smash each other with mallets.(27)

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Švankmajer brings out the surrealism inherent in Poe's work through his carrying the author's suggestion, that of the hidden lives of objects, to its logical conclusion.

Ironically enough, the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia was itself responsible, in part, for Švankmajer's decision to adapt Poe's short stories. During the 1980s, the animator was allowed to make only films adapted from "literary classics,"(28) only a bureaucrat could believe that literary classics could be nothing but "safe," as was proven in these two works (and, in fact, *The Pendulum, the Pit and Hope* was censored,(29) and led to Švankmajer being blacklisted(30)). The fact that Poe's prose and Švankmajer's images are so compatible says much about the universality of oppression, fear, suffering...and horror.

Jan Švankmajer has made a career, such as it is, from expressing his rage at the stupidity and lack of humanity of bureaucracy and totalitarianism of all stripes. To do this, he has linked the inanimate and the animate; made the un-living live, and the living something hellish. What better inspiration for such a project than the writings of Edgar Allan Poe?

Figure 2: *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1981)

Notes

1. Regarding this relative critical and scholarly neglect, Jan Uhde remarks: "This may sound surprising since Švankmajer has produced twenty-six shorts and two features over the last three decades and is the recipient of numerous international festival prizes and awards. Despite the critical acclaim, his achievements have remained in partial obscurity." Jan Uhde, Book Review, "The Arcimboldo of Animation," *Kinema: A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media*, No. 4 (Fall 1995), 89. And Peter Hames explains: "Jan Švankmajer has only recently attracted major critical attention and this is partly due to the obscurity within which makers of short/animation films conventionally work...and while [his] films won awards, they could still be contained within the 'invisible' world of the short film." Peter Hames, "Czechoslovakia: After the Spring," in Daniel J. Goulding, ed. *Post New Wave Cinema in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 131. The first, and so far only, book length treatment on Švankmajer, at least in the English language, was published in 1995: Peter Hames (ed.), *Dark Alchemy: The Films of Jan Švankmajer* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995).

2. One notable exception is the Švankmajer-influenced animation work of the Brothers Quay.

3. Terrence Rafferty, "All Sizes," *The New Yorker*, August 8, 1988, 77.

4. Ibid., 77-78.

5. Caryn James, "Aggressive Objects Take It Out on Helpless People," *The New York Times 138,* (May 3, 1989), C 19.

6. Rafferty, 77.

7. The films discussed in this article were produced before the fall of the Soviet Union, and before Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993.

8. Jan Švankmajer quoted in "Švankmajer on *Alice*" (interview),
http://www.illumin.co.uk/svank/biog/inter/svank.html;
this interview originally appeared in *Afterimage* 13 (Autumn 1987).

9. Anthony Lane, "Kafka's Heir," *The New Yorker*, 70, October 31, 1994, 50.

10. "The Torture of Hope" originally appeared in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's 1888 collection of short stories, *Nouveaux Contes Cruels*; it can be found on the Internet at http://gaslight.mtroyal.ab.ca/gaslight/tortshil.htm.

”Villiers de l’Isle-Adam: A Chancun son Infini,” an article by Arthur Symons on Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, which originally appeared in his 1908 book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, can be found at http://gaslight.mtroyal.ca/isleadam.htm.

11. Maureen Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics* (London: John Libbey, 1998), 173.

12. It is interesting to note that the irony of Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s story is far more ambiguous than that of either Poe’s story or Švankmajer’s film. Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s protagonist is a rabbi, imprisoned for ”usury and pitiless scorn for the poor,” and tortured by the third Grand Inquisitor of Spain, who seeks the Jew’s redemption. The Grand Inquisitor’s words at the end of the story, ”What, my son! On the eve, perchance, of salvation - you wished to leave us?”, seem at least as heartfelt as they do sinister, as do his apologies for the rabbi’s torture, and his explanation of the ”baptism of fire” scheduled for the next day. The fact that de l’Isle-Adam was a devout Catholic (in the words of James Huneker, a ”fierce, even militant, Roman Catholic” [in ”Villiers de l’Isle Adam,” which originally appeared in Huneker’s 1918 *Iconoclasts: A Book of Dramatists*, and can be found at http://www.io.com/~larrybob/villiers.html]) and in fact dedicated one of his books to the Pope, and railed in his literature against ”materialism” (an accusation often directed at Jews, as was usury), increase the possibility that Villiers de l’Isle-Adam actually sympathized with the Grand Inquisitor as much as, or perhaps more than, with the rabbi (Symons, http://gaslight.mtroyal.ca/isleadam.htm).

13. This was especially true during World War I.

14. Ronald Holloway quoted in Michael O’Pray, ”Jan Švankmajer: A Mannerist Surrealist,” in Hames, *Dark Alchemy...*, 26.

15. Uhde, 89.

16. O’Pray, 64.

17. Hames explains that Švankmajer is ”not only the outstanding figure within Czech animation but also the one filmmaker whose work appears unrestricted by the political situation. No doubt, this is partly due to his making short films and also to the fact that ’avant garde’ work is more acceptable if contained within the generic term of the ’trick film’ (anything but live action)....” Hames, ”Czechoslovakia: After the Spring,” 131.

18. Lane, 54.

19. Lane, 63.

20. This passage from Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s *Axël* can be found in Symons.

21. Švankmajer quoted in ”Švankmajer on *Alice*.”

22. Poe’s poem ”The Haunted Palace”, first published in 1839, is quoted in its entirety in his short story ”The Fall of the House of Usher” (also first published in 1839), upon which Švankmajer’s film is based.

23. Roger Cardinal, ”Thinking Through Things: The Presence of Objects in the Early Films of Jan Švankmajer,” in Hames, *Dark Alchemy...*, 66.

24. Jan Švankmajer quoted in Geoff Andrew, ”Malice in Wonderland,”
http://www.illumin.co.uk/svank/biog/inter/andrew1.html;
this article originally appeared in *Time Out*, October 19-26 1988, 16-17.

25. Švankmajer quoted in Cardinal, 66.

26. Cardinal, 93.

27. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc. 1994), 676.

28. Peter Hames, ”Interview with Jan Švankmajer,” in Hames, *Dark Alchemy...*, 100.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 116.