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Downing the Folk-Festive: Menacing Meals in the Films of Jan Svankmajer

Jan Svankmajer is perhaps best known as an animator of clay figures and marionettes who casts his creations in stories adapted from or inspired by gothic or central European folk literature. Svankmajer's films are immediately recognisable by their inanimate actors' stylised gestures, movement and appearance, yet they also have in common a less obvious thematic signature in their overriding fixation with the oral and in particular their recurrent images of food and consumption.

Svankmajer has said of this, "I was a

Physiomythological Diluvian Picture, for example, depicts a half-man, half-bird subject with a branch growing out of its posterior—a grotesque figure if ever there was one.

Critic Philip Thomson notes that Lautréamont's chance meeting of a sewing-machine and an umbrella on the operating table is

In many of Svankmajer's films all three of these instances of the folk-festive appear in a single scene, and sometimes are represented in a single image, as in one of the more viscerally effective animated scenes in Svankmajer's feature-length *Faust* (1994). When Lucifer finally convinces Faust to sign the compact for his soul using a pen inked with his own blood, the huge wooden head of an angelic marionette is suddenly pictured rolling through an orderly garden and then onto the scene. From its mouth emerge dozens of tiny angels, who fly up and wrest the pen from Faust's hand, snapping it in two. In response the wooden head of a grotesque demon is pictured rolling onto the scene—but its route is via the wilderness. From this devil's mouth fly miniature winged demons, who grasp another feathered pen and place it in Faust's hand. The angels quickly wrest it again and snap it in two. This goes back and forth a few times until the tiny demons attack the tiny angels *en masse*, dismember them and begin raping some of them. A few bedraggled and bleeding angels survive and cr

is nothing to identify with—no collective, no high or low, only the absurdity of the situation, which can grant a few laughs, at least.

Svankmajer's texts, whether his own or adaptations of romantic/gothic authors such as Goethe, Carroll or Poe, are more often than not evocative of this earlier, and very central European, vision of Europe, both in their narratives and their *mise en scène*. His treatments of forms that have folk-festive associations, however, deny them any "festive" quality. Instead, his films reflect a surrealist approach that marries bleak existentialism with the absurd, replacing Bakhtin's emphasis on joviality and the carnivalesque with the black humour much lauded by Breton.

Bakhtin's interpretation of Rabelais posits the material bodily lower stratum—the brute realitand theirslais can

terms, a reaction to the rationalism that the movement's members saw as responsible for leading to the atrocities of the First World War.) Svankmajer doesn't expropriate the grotesque of its happier face or divest it of the festive—history has done this. What Svankmajer does is invest such forms with a menace—albeit a menace with an evil grin—appropriate in a society where the promise of universal brotherhood has been betrayed by a dystopian totalitarian state—Big Brother instead of brotherhood. The short *Death of Stalinism in Bohemia* (1990) is a very direct example of this, with its depiction of humanity as the product of an assembly line where mass production quickly recycles the end-product back into a mass grave from which it creates new expendables.

The Czech surrealists themselves, with their emphasis on cooperative group activity and aesthetic interdependence, might offer a constructive model for the concept of the collective. Svankmajer's artistic 'experiments' in tactilism, meanwhile, attempt to employ materiality in the service of surrealism and its investigation of the everyday life of ordinary objects. These are palliative attempts, perhaps, to address the sober truths that inhabit his films, where the individual is at the mercy of a world full of hostile objects and unseen forces.

An examination of the use of food as image and metaphor in Svankmajer's films will demonstrate how its original identification as a source of abundance, renewal and a symbol of brotherhood can—as a fetish or symbol of its own lack, its function as tool and commodity, its various distortions—appropriate the hollowed shell of grotesque violence and invert to become an absurd emblem of isolation and death. Its portrayal through the use of stop-motion animation invokes the marionette theatre—and many films directly

use marionettes—and also poses questions about the relation of the animate to the inanimate, and thereby our own relation to the inanimate and our negotiations with death.

Festive humour and the folk vs. black humour and the surreal

In *Rabelais and his World*, Mikhail Bakhtin analyses the age-old system of carnival in which popular folk forms using festive laughter and the grotesque had an important social role that subsequently receded with the Enlightenment. For Rabelais, the festive laughter of the carnivalesque temporarily dispelled the boundaries between the sacred and profane, the official and the unofficial, erasing hierarchy and revealing the joyful endurance of the base and procreative element of humanity. Popular festive forms included abundant feasts, bloody massacres, exaggerated bodily dimensions and a fixation with the sexual and with ordure.

forms of expression survive in the form of a black rather than regenerative, lighthearted humour. The humour is a reaction that Andre Breton cites in his essay on Lewis Carroll, writing that

> the intelligent mind will react to the inconceivable or unacceptable situation by embracing the absurd. There is nothing that intelligent humor cannot resolve in gales of laughter, not even the void.... Laughter...stands at the lip of the void, offers us the void as a pledge.[6]

Breton himself attributes to black humour “a principle of total insubordination

The mouth is, of course, more than just an orifice for ingestion (or burping, which is also under the rule of the grotesque). It also articulates the rational and expressive—which are not necessarily the same by any means. Svankmajer comments on the sorry state of free expression in communist Czechoslovakia, sometimes directly and at other times more indirectly.

In *Alice* (1988), his first feature length film and an adaptation of the famous Lewis Carroll story, the "drink me" bottle contains ink, which when drunk reduces Alice to a state of vulnerability. A potential emblem of the press or written expression, ink should empower, but in a society built on censorship and oppression (both of which stung Svankmajer for the many years he was effectively banned), it translates to risk, compromise and vulnerability.

In *A Quiet Week in the Country* (1969) —a trilogy of sorts, like the later *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982), but seen through a keyhole aperture by an unidentified man—the dangers of expression loom even greater. In the first segment, wrapped sweets emerge from an old tin and begin unwrapping themselves only to reveal rusty old screws. These migrate onto an old typewriter, one to a key, with the sharp end of each screw pointing up so that writing would be a painful process, implying injury as a possible consequence of free speech. In the second vignette, a disembodied tongue slides out of a hole in the wall, visits a washbasin to lick out the insides of some dirty pots, and finally inserts itself in a mincer, where it is ground into small scrolls of newsprint. This seems to imply that, while it can be difficult to get published anywhere, it might end up being a posthumous process in certain societies. The third "dialogue" of the trilogy of animated shorts *Dimensions of Dialogue* features the clay heads of two men, facing each other.

Camporesi notes that peasants baked their loaves of bread in a variety of different shapes, but that nearly all embodied the female or male reproductive principle. There were not only phallic loaves but round, pregnant loaves or loaves moulded with a breast motif. In the folk-festive scheme Camporesi describes, however, bread was not merely imbued with a generative symbolism to counter the inevitable destruction connoted by its lack. The other essential component was laughter, which not only fended off death but transformed it into something positive. In this regard laughter arose not from some rude humour regarding the bread's carnal shape, something that today might find its origin in the repression of the sexual, but from a joyous response to the bread's function as a marker of the vital role of death in the cycle of fecundity.

It might seem difficult to conclude that, behind the symbolism, peasants were laughing at the fact that their loved ones were fertilizer, but contemporary society can have little appreciation of how real the threat of .8(ho(o)-94(thea14.4(16(a)4te)uaTi19.3 06(a)4.6(t) TD-0.0

> are tightly bound together in an inseparable dialectical relationship in all cultures of the agrarian type, which have the profound nucleus of their religiosity—a constant relation between and earth and sub-soil, fertility and sterility—in vegetable rebirth and reproduction by means of dead seeds.[20]

In the dialectical space of Svankmajer's films, however, the alchemy of this natural process has been disrupted. The age-old dance between sex and death stumbles. In food or the feast, in the animate force of nature represented by clay or mud given motion, in the marionette player in the twisted carnival there is no fertility that offers human comfort, at least in an existential sense. Th

black humour that permeates Svankmajer's films: "Dancing and laughing on the edge of the abyss while everything, amidst massacre, butchery and horror, is tumbling down around them."[22] It recalls Breton's assertion that laughter can stand at the lip of the void and laugh death in the face. Breton's cackle, however, is the sole escape of the absurd, not the "act of piety which transforms death into a new birth."[23]

This example of the old sacrificed to the sustenance of the young also relates to the prevalence of cannibalism as a motif in Svankmajer's works. *Little Otik* (2000) invokes this when the monster devours its parents, for example. In general, while Bakhtin envisioned the folk-festive as imparting a liberating sense of identity in the collective, he chose not to emphasise the role of the individual as sacrificial lamb to that greater good. In Svankmajer, however, a prevailing theme of cannibalism inverts the emphasis and illustrates the absence of any such Rabelaisian brotherhood.

The first of the three segments of *Dimensions of Dialogue*, for example, features two Arcimboldo-inspired human

cycle of eating and vomiting is nearly slapstick in its dimensions and the profiles clearly caricatures, the endless repetition and violence belies an absurdist, tentative humour. This also follows from the film's cultural context as a general comment on globalisation and its homogenising, culturally erosive effects. Modernity robs the piece of any underlying folk-festive subtext that promises renewal and rebirth.

Cannibalistic scenarios convey a more specific, pointed social commentary in such shorts as *Jabberwocky* (1971), another adaptation of a Lewis Carroll story. A stream of small dolls tear their way out of a larger straw doll, are then dismembered, minced in a coffee grinder, and cooked on a miniature stove. They are then casually nibbled on by a number of large dolls at a tea party. On one level the large dolls represent the dominant political establishment dining on the smaller dolls (i.e., the Czech populace) and the scenario also alludes to the hypocrisy of Czech society under the oppression of political "normalisation" in which, for instance, neighbours were encouraged to inform on neighbours.

Svankmajer's *Food* (1992) is also an excoriating take on the socio-political reality in communist Czechoslovakia. It is divided into three vignettes, the first of which, *Breakfast*, features humanoid vending machines that dispense a meagre meal only after complicated and exhausting manipulations. The final scene is of a long line of hungry people waiting patiently for their ration. The mockery of communist inefficiency is apparent—a wryly amusing take on a bleak reality. *Lunch*

Otik is no ordinary child but the figment of its parents' imaginations made, if not flesh, then wood: the figuration of their desires pulled from the mundanity of the back yard and given a ferocious animacy. Literally dug up from the garden by Mr Horak, this root/ogre/child is like the mandrake of folk-lore, except that instead of being born from the fallen seed of a dead man, it sprouts from the black humour of a crestfallen man with dead seed—the impotent husband playing what he thinks to be a joke on his child-obsessed but childless wife. Otik eats nearly everything and everyone over the course of the film, and as such might be read as an embodiment of the primal force of hunger—Bakhtin's material bodily lower stratum. As an unearthed root, he is literally *substratum*. Like Bakhtin's devouring principle, he consumes both the common (the cat) and the symbols of authority (the social worker, who even yells "I'm an official!" to get Bozenka, Otik's "mother" to let her in).

While it bears many comparisons with his other films, *Little Otik* isn't entirely typical of Svankmajer's repertoire. The use of animation is less frequent than in any of his films and the storytelling stretches it to an overlong two hours plus. But *Little Otik*—or *Otesanek* in Czech (the translation of which connotes both "to hew" and a child that eats everything)—is very much representative of Svankmajer's oeuvre in other ways. Its

accompanies it, the surreality of the Horaks' situation, the folk and fairy tale elements from which the story itself was drawn: all are common to most if not all of his films.

The other primary theme that *Little Otik* shares with its cinematic siblings is that of food and consumption. Nearly everyone in the film is eating most of the time. The settings are usually in the home, often concerning the kitchen—and most outings involve the grocer or the butcher. Scene changes are often introduced with a close-up of a bowl of soup or of someone shoving far too much meat pie into their mouth. Another early close-up of a woman peeling potatoes, removing their "eyes," foreshadows the arrival of Otik in that it anthropomorphises the potato, a tuber, or root vegetable. In many cases the puppet literally *is* food in Svankmajer's films, which curiously echoes the early hand puppet tradition (some early hand puppets were actually made of sausage).[24] And even when his puppets aren't foodstuffs themselves, they're usually eating something, particularly in *Little Otik*.

Little Otik also makes many references to earlier Svankmajer films, particularly *Down to the Cellar* (1983), which in many ways prefigures *Alice,* and is centred on a girl's trip to the cellar to fetch potatoes. On her trip, however, the potatoes crawl out of the basket and she encounters carnivorous shoes and a woman who bakes rolls made of dough mixed from coal dust. The elusive potato and the vicious, hungry shoe seem more the stuff of comedy than nightmares, yet the subtle treatment evokes a sense of the uncanny and raises the rather black subjects of hunger, deprivation and child abuse. In *Little Otik,* Alzbetka, the young protagonist of the story, ventures into what looks to be nearly the same cellar that the other little girl visits with trepidation in Svankmajer's earlier short. Alzbetka plays less the role of the victim, but must also beware something

sprouts nails. Food is clearly far from wholesome in Wonderland—or in any of Svankmajer's surrealist depictions of reality.

The notion of cannibalism points most decisively to the existential rift that has fractured the concept of self in modernity—the rift of trust between individual and group. We become food; we negotiate the mouth of the other—the liminal, now satanic space where some theologians suggested that the hope for bodily resurrection would be destroyed, where the self is dissolved in the other.

Food is only eternally abundant as an ideal; as a specificity it is bound to become excrement, much as youth is only an ideal, with the individual youth doomed to eventual old age. The implication of this is that the self too is only an ideal, an illusory but necessary construct. Perhaps an extreme example such as cannibalism is necessary to reveal how deeply we ascribe to the culture of the individual (in a modern rather than

Notes

[1] In an interview following a screening of *Little Otik* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 2002.
[2] Peter Kral interview, trans. Jill McGreal (*Afterimage 13*, 1987), 23.
[3] Franklin Rosemont,