

An assembly line of human figures grinding human figures for food, dolls feed dolls, doll eats dolls. Ironing, flattering, being dressed, being cut up, being tamed... Steven Tsang (TSANG Chun-leung) sees the dramatization of carnivorous acts as more than the pure exercise imagination. The politics of nonsense is not just linguistic gibberish or random image association, but structured against the paradigm of human civilization; and that requires a narrative strategy beyond regular story-telling. Svenkmajer wants us to see differently, and asks a different sort of questions in following a narrative. 看到喂小娃娃的大娃娃就知道是女的，看到舞動的水手裝就自動知道是男的。再看下去，人吃人，有血有肉的黑貓時不時推倒積木，一面是歷史砌圖，另一面是迷宮的路線；頑皮也好，冥頑不靈的顛覆也好，最終，它被鎖在籠裏動彈不得。除了牆上掛的攝影人像之外就一個「人」也沒有，屋子裡卻充滿了人類的活動。物件長年累月吸收了人類強加它們身上的「用途」、「價值」，也穿背著人類的規範，像鬼魅的模仿著我們的「正常」活動。這會是純荒誕或「無釐頭」嗎？曾俊良看到歷史、文明、性別的社會結構；他能看到，因為看穿了動畫大師史文梅耶以物件為本的獨特敘事結構和跨媒想像。

A Few Doors that Opens to the World of Nonsense | TSANG Chun-leung Steven

Introduction

Jabberwocky is an animation short film made in 1971 by Czech artist Jan Svankmajer. The unique and special thing about animation is the use of non-sense as a narrative method, which challenges the notion of "coherence" in conventional storytelling. Such a method does not aim to insert clear messages to attract the audiences, but to use the material to tell in-depth reality. For me, it is an experience of feeling along with Svankmajer's imagination rather than paying attention to the storyline. Thus, after studying and knowing the narrative strategy and cultural back stories behind the film, I find myself experiencing world history with "things" pertinent to the film.

Surrealism

Surrealism is one of the important features of the film. It must be pointed out that Svankmajer has said that surrealism is not an artistic style but a means of investigating and exploring reality, a journey into the depths of the soul. Surely the purpose has been well achieved by Svankmajer where bold imagination took place that takes over what is purely aesthetic. The use of mass-produced daily objects in unusual ways rather generates a certain creepiness and illusion that results in constructing another dimension and yet this dimension is the critical reflection of reality.

Jabberwocky is a good name to be used for the film as it links to Alice (in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in the Wonderland*) who looks into the world of the mirror. For me, I was enjoying the creepy mood of the film and at the same time following the pulled away world to investigate and to explore, like an "adult child," the world in new

perspectives. Surreal feelings guide us to see the real world differently: Svankmajer treats us like a newborn baby with an empty mind, free from pre-conception and conscious desires for what the new world should be like. I might say this purpose has been achieved with a story-telling method that reflects the world on a unique narrative space and yet cleverly amount to the message Svankmajer wants to express.

Philosophies of Non-sense

>Material interaction

“Playing” is a keyword to the work. Playing is felt in the use of material and editing methods. Objects, like human characters, are "playing" in the real world: dolls interact with the human domestic environment with a grinder, dining, and paper-cut figures and miniature sculptures are shown in working environment, in sailor suits dancing suggesting clues to world history. Other non-human things animated include a 2D maze, portrait of a man on the wall, and a real-life black cat.

Despite the heavy metaphorical meanings behind the objects, what immediately grabs viewers' attention is not the themes and messages, but the use of objects and what they do in scenes of a domestic interior. Many of the objects are in the form of females and children; they look like toys supposed to be played by children and yet their actions are always imbued with a certain value. For example, the baby doll is supposed to let children role-play how to take care of others. Solider dolls help children to imagine what a combat scene is like. I believe Svankmajer pushes all assumed value of an object into a literal level to show us the possible deeper meanings. Baby dolls are crawling out of a big doll -- but isn't that humans reproducing humans, except literally? Dolls, which represent humans, are passive rather than active. Dolls in a factory assembly line situation jump into the grinder to be processed; some of them are being ironed flat by an automatic working iron. Clothes move like humans are wearing them except we don't see the human body. Some dolls are cooking, taking care of other dolls, and they boil other dolls to feed the baby dolls. All this is an unusual approach to the use of an object whereby the objects perform and tell the story instead of being turned to the service of a plot.

In Svankmajer's *Jabberwock*, the narrative meanings and hidden values are concerned with exploring the dark, the irrational depths beneath appearances, excavating what is nonsensical and paradoxical which underlie our everyday perceptions and ordered thought. Svankmajer's method is to draw them to a shimmering, contradictory, animated surface.



from Ben Hjorth's essay

>Editing

One may say Svankmajer's work is the pure enjoyment of non-sense, like Lewis Carroll's, presented to us through playful use of everyday objects and editing. However, the work itself is not without its own formal measures, just as Carroll's putting words together into nonsense was nonetheless observing the traditional British poetic structure. In Svankmajer's *Jabberwocky*, objects interacting with one another generate the narrative body and the story. The animation picture is divided into different topics that represent different historical periods and events in human civilization; it is far more than a traditional animation for children. The use of children's things and a child-like perspective is for adults. In terms of the result of editing, the narrative offers no children's storytelling structure. It reveals an imaginary world that structures realities in ways not experienced in popular media. Although I personally think the entire narrative is still following a 3 act structure, the director has re-directed our attention from a well formed story with climaxes and a dramatic resolution to the fantastic and to elements that interrupt our interpretation, thus challenging our habit of narrative comprehensive. I think the work indirectly turns us back into a pre-grown person -- to re-learn how to observe the world by examining human values from the point of view of objects. I personally think if you grow up a world according to Svankmajer's editing and narrative method, we would have expressed and understood the world very differently. *Jabberwocky* separates the work into four main sessions, each divided by an interlude -- a puzzle which shows a maze with routes for exit, then destroyed by a live-action black cat. However, the puzzle (and the maze) each time describes a

different topic built upon the previous episode. The opening sequence shows a buttock slapped by a hand, followed by a walking wardrobe wandering around the forest and opening up its doors in a room, and this paves the way for many different objects to be turned alive like they are in a typical fairy tale. This sequence set the basic narrative principle, that is, how components are pieced together. We see a sparkling girl chase her smaller self, which reminds me of Alice chasing the queen and, from a social perspective, children chasing the role of a person. In reality, don't we often question the standards of what is normal and what is not, and who set such standards? Svankmajer's montage work creates a new world that stretches realities that we know, and addresses the audience up front. The use of objects creates possibilities that take the viewer away from the constraint of a normal story that conforms to realism whereby story and form must synchronize. As for Svankmajer, he is totally free -- reality, form and storyline can be independent of one another -- he makes everything possible as he likes.

Meaning with the non-sense and metaphor

"...to have allowed nothing to pass through sense, but to have played out everything in nonsense" -- Gilles Deleuze

The prominence of Svankmajer's *Jabberwocky* is his rebellion against mass culture, in two aspects. The first is in the form of narrative revolt, an alternative voice that alludes to no set convention and is freely imbued with imagination. The other is his critique of gender structure and social role. Svankmajer intelligently juxtaposes the two levels of rebellion in one sight-and-sound entity in which they counteract. The work's narrative may not follow any familiar trajectories, but it forms its own world.

Crucially, in Švankmajer's hands, animation works are not performed for the idle entertainment of children; on the contrary, what these toys do might give some parents the caution of a pause, and that might just be one of the maker's intended purposes.



from Ben Hjorth's essay

As Ben Hjorth mentions, the use of the object, the toys, is very alternative and out of normal sense. But the appearance of the object is the reflection of values of the real world instead of helping to push the story. So to say, the object itself is the story.

Every single object has its own appearance value. Thus, the sheer ensemble of objects is the gathering together of many meanings already ascribed to them in everyday culture. Objects have different appearances and they each interact with different

objects in a unique way. To me, this is most prominent in the black cat and the sailor suit boy (without the boy). The black cat is the metaphor of rebellion and challenge in which the puzzle of history has been pushed down but the cat and maze also appear as a metaphor of attempts to challenge and to confront, of constantly finding new solutions, such as in reflecting on the power structure of the gender in society. The sailor suit without a physical body acts as a boy, the representation of an “innocent” child with an empty mind to observe and experience the world, and to acquire the techniques to become an adult man. Here Svankmajer plays on our social norm of assuming a soldier suit to represent the male. Indeed, we see the soldier dolls ring the bell to order the female dolls to work, which points to how boys are brainwashed, as an “innocent” child, to grow into a man in charge of power and to assert discipline onto society and other human beings.

Relationship with Jabberwocky

Similar to Alice's adventures (Carroll), *Jabberwocky* the animation (Svankmajer) upholds the narrative use of non-sense: the duration of the work is not dictated by conventions, but decided by the interaction events of the objects as the artist wants them. *Jabberwocky* is therefore highlights space over time. Artistic creativity focuses on magnifying the vertical narrative dimension, that is, the richness of details that holds our attention, as opposed to the horizontal dimension, that is, where the story is going next and what will happen to the characters. At the same time, the horizontal dimension has a strong episodic structure by which narrative events are divided into 4 sessions, each linked back to the flow and balance of the playing and the display of imagination. Therefore, non-sense is practically achieved in both Alice's poem's word form and *Jabberwocky's* moving image form and, at the same time, narrative takes over the story by foregrounding space. Both of them express a sense of “playfulness.”

The two connected works are not without difference. *Jabberwocky* the film pushes the object value to the surface to generate the story. Therefore, it is important for viewers to note the many interesting objects as historical and cultural metaphors while at the same time experiencing a new (fabricated) world. Carroll's poem "Jabberwocky" is pure non-sense, words with rhythm prompted by imagination with no meaning; the poem is its own self-sufficient world.

The challenge

All in all, my analysis of Svankmajer's *Jabberwocky* shows the fascinating features of animation narrative in animation works with figurative values whereby this genre is given the opportunity for the director to borrow literature and turn it into his own work of imagination. In doing so, Svankmajer expresses his own way to challenge traditional storytelling method and a way to experiment the narrative beyond the 3-act structure. As I mentioned before, *Jabberwocky* is the interaction of moving objects beyond time-based and within the space. Thus, animation content is a form of intermedia play common in experimental art. Medium specificity is highlighted in this genre to drag attention from story expression to experience and exploration of time and space, generating an alternative form of narrative.

(copy-edited by Linda C.H. Lai)

***Editor's note: While this essay connects Svankmajer's animation *Jabberwocky* (1971) and its source poem of the same title in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in the Wonderland*, readers may want to make further comparison with Svankmajer's animation picture *Alice* (1988), to observe the development of Svankmajer's method of nonsense.

Reference

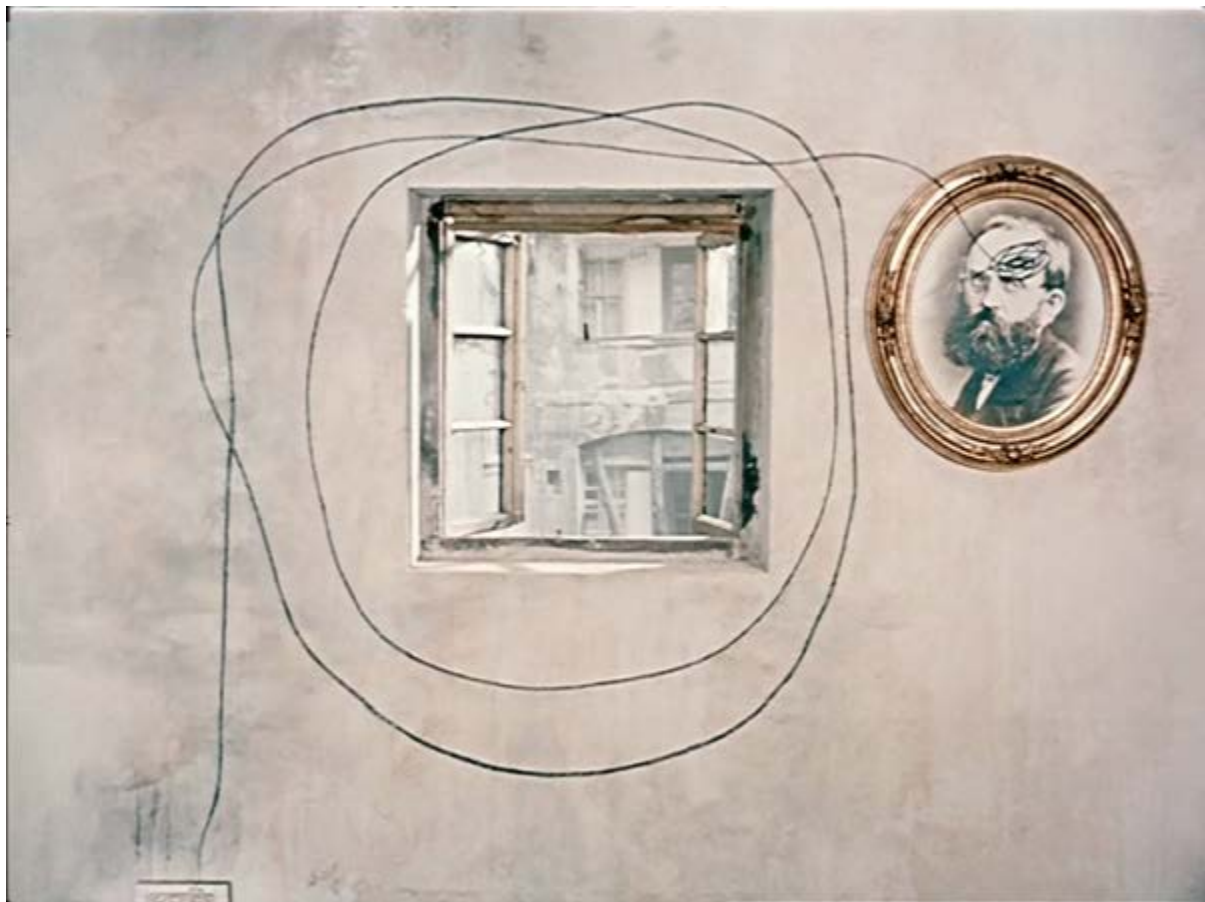
Ben Hjorth (2014): "Philosophies of Non-sense: Jan Svankmajer's *Jabberwocky*"; *Senses of Cinema*, issue 71.

Jan Švankmajer (2002): "Bringing up Baby" (interview with Peter Hames), *Kinoeye*, vol. 2, no. 1, <http://www.kinoeye.org/02/01/hames01.php>.

Gilles Deleuze (1993): "Lewis Carroll", *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. D. W. Smith and M. A. Greco, Verso, London, 1998, pp. 21-22.

"Jabberwocky" by StripperMavis, blog entry: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4096b2e101000azb.html

To view all posts of the [Ventriloquists Series](#) (the exhibition's daily newsletter)



The 63-work exhibition **"The Ventriloquists...Thinking Narratively"** (4-19 July 2020)

and **2 screenings** are finished.

Seven works are awarded prizes, selected by FPC, Feaston and the audience