



The Ventriloquists 03. On Švankmajer's Jabberwocky (1971) by Harmanjeet Singh

On the eve of The Ventriloquists' physical opening (4 July 2020), ... Adapting Ben Hjorth's "Philosophies of Non-sense: Jan Švankmajer's animation work Jabberwocky"; Senses of Cinema, issue 71, 2014, Harmanjeet Singh pays special attention to Švankmajer's object play.

***The Ventriloquists series (newsletter of the exhibition, daily updates)

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Beyond Surrealist non-sense in Švankmajer's *Jabberwocky*: the mereness of things, the thereness of stop-motion 「物件」變「東西」。那時那地的現在進行式傳真。定格動畫。

by Harmanjeet Singh

The introductory sequence of the renowned Czech filmmaker Jan Švankmajer's *Zvahlav aneb Saticky Slameného Huberta* (aka *Jabberwocky*, 1971) features the close-up of the firm surface of a minor's buttocks recurrently hit by the large hand of an adult. The Czech surrealist filmmaker has an obsession with morphing, inaccurate, and disjointed bodies. In this stop motion movie, in multifarious ways he sheds light on ordinary things such as toys and clothes; and he instills lives into these objects to challenge the ways in which individuals develop their understanding of the world [1]. The three lyrical slaps, in Švankmajer's irregular stop-motion, are linked to three resounding blows in a manner as if an individual has been banging the door of an outsized hall which contained utmost emptiness. The thrashings by which the film has made its opening, visually as well as aurally, onto a secretive and disturbing internal space, expressed evocatively throughout the surrealist fiction of juvenile enthrallment and fear. In this short essay, my thesis statement is that "Jan Švankmajer's movie *Jabberwocky* remains highly nonsensical, similar to the poem on which it is based owing to Jan Švankmajer's inclination towards objects."

The film is centred on Lewis Carroll's well-known "nonsensical poem" of the similar name, wherein Alice reads in the follow-up to her main adventures in the *Wonderland*, *Through the Looking-Glass* in 1871. *Jabberwocky* (1971) is not the only work of Svankmajer's that gained him recognition for his acclimatizing Lewis Carroll's works. We think of his feature-length movie, *Alice* (1988), in which his attitude is gloomier than Carroll's in *Alice in Wonderland*. [2] Nevertheless, the short film does not exactly align with the poem except reciting it. *Jabberwocky* is Svankmajer's enthusiastically enchanted as well as darkly imaginative investigation of stop-motion moving picture. In the narrative "Through the Looking-Glass," Alice has to read the verse through a looking-glass, as it primarily seemed to be inverted on the page. Carroll's seemingly imaginative composition has been typically taken as a simple superficial nonsense, or in other words appeared as "literature for children," which had a significant impact on Švankmajer's Surrealist creation.

According to some studies, both Carroll and Svankmajer were highly alarmed to explore the shady and unreasonable complexities behind presences, unearthing the nonsensical as well as the inconsistent associations of sense and connotations triggered by the observations of ordinary individuals and well-ordered thought [3]. Furthermore, both have been concerned with bringing darkness to a gleaming, animated surface that seems to speak the opposite. In has been noted that Švankmajer's film reels create a type of reflection, caught up in a nature that unexpectedly seems imaginary and more significant than real. Visually, Švankmajer's animation has worked at the level of the surface, since it has played, detonated as well as aggressively rearranged such surfaces, intentionally disrespectful for "naturalistic" associations between the external and internal, of sensation versus logic (or sense), all re-directed with the fears of depth [4]. The outlandish, unbalanced surface of appearance in addition to its performances of expression repeatedly directed the viewers to things that are absent, or things which have completely died out, or things lying beneath or being locked in the cabinet. Scholars have claimed that the world of *Jabberwocky* is occupied by objects of a mass philosophy and values that have surpassed the world whereby lifeless nonliving objects or playthings of this mass production turn out to be a kind of life existing. Critically, Švankmajer in *Jabberwocky* makes no pretence that such a condition of the world is in any way tameable, only to be presented as the futile entertainment of the minors. [5]



A Švankmajer object. Source: Kelen (2016)

At this juncture, it is important to relate Švankmajer's understanding and approach of narrative to Thing Theory [*Thing Theory is a branch of Critical Theory that focuses on human-object interaction; it holds the view that an object becomes a thing when it no longer serves its normal function.*]. But before discussing Švankmajer's work, we must focus on an explanation of 'object'.

According to some scholars, surrealism holds that objects are channels for the artist or viewer's projection of their yearnings. The following surrealist explanation, for example, gives us some hint, "The tomato has turned out to be a balloon for the person who perceives it as such." To the individual, however, it is not a concern at all whether the object or the thing is a tomato or a balloon or any other object. What matters is that it is a balloon in his imagination. [6] By this logic, an object tends to yield to the transformative influence of the mind and becomes a thing. Švankmajer has recurrently recognized himself as a "militant surrealist." To the critics, the term tends to instigate an ideological attitude to the movement, further proposing that Švankmajer mainly acts as a determined and committed follower of surrealism, articulating it as authoritative doctrines [7]. Thus, in accepting Švankmajer's self-explanation of his artistic method, there is a dire need to evaluate the role of the objects which have been Breton's explanation of surrealism and its manifestos. Objects primarily tend to serve a peripheral role in the domain of Breton's First Manifesto of Surrealism. Deferential to psychic automatism [8], Breton finds objects to be a source whereby the world must be refashioned once more.

Thing theory suggests the importance of understanding objects as things in *Jabberwocky*, and how things are used to reconcile the lives of humans. It frees us from getting caught in the midst of the contradictions of poststructuralism and Freudian psychology. There are two extreme ways to understand objects. On the one hand, the "mereness" of things posits that things are just physical presences, "matter-of-fact and mute" and, on the other, things matter because of the ideas in them. Humans are often being understood within this framework. [9] On a different note, Thing theory has received little attention in the domain of film studies, which is often grounded in the supposition of the mediated, transitory attributes of the moving image rather than an embodied essentiality that emphasizes the 'thereness' of cinema, that is, rendering what was *there* (the camera, light, the scene, life itself) to be *here* (with the audience). If thing theory is to be applied in a constructive manner to discuss films, there is no better place to start than with stop motion animation, which puts substantial emphasis on the illusion of instilling liveness in objects, which is a main approach of Švankmajer's. His movies undoubtedly are filled with insistent hyper-real sound designs along with the pans which almost strike the surface of objects. Švankmajer, self-defined as a "militant surrealist," does not set out from this model in his own explication of *Jabberwocky*; rather, he is found to be looking back onto the Freudian record of the development of a child all through the stages starting from homosexuality and sado-masochism to the revolt against the paternal [10]. The animated *Jabberwocky* started with a child's reciting Carroll's poem *Jabberwocky*, and subsequent to it is the play area, presented as a succession of stop-motion animated vignettes. Švankmajer argued that this points to the apprehensions of the absent child enacted in a series of symbolic treatment all through the work. [11]

Certainly, in Švankmajer's art, the intended effect is not so much the impression of changeability as the idea that objects may be visible in one moment but vanish in an eye blink, flashing up like the beam of the Cheshire Cat besides becoming indistinguishable just as rapidly [12].



Švankmajer's art. Source: Sera (2018)

What matters is the visible gaps between imageries — unlocked spaces, unexpected appearances, and disappearances of “cut-up pieces” of realism, whereby Švankmajer unclutter onto whole other domains.

To conclude, whereas Lewis Carroll primarily focused on permitting nothing to surpass through the sense, thus playing out everything according to his philosophy of nonsense, Svankmajer emphasized the multiplicity of nonsenses and extended that to give an explanation of the whole universe. Beauty sits next to fears, profundity rolled surface. Svankmajer allows contradictions to come together simultaneously, iridescent, animated surfaces appearing and disappearing — his method touches upon the ethereal yet perceptible existence, challenging viewers with unexpected nonappearances. The imageries in Svankmajer's *Jabberwocky* have magnificently joined together to create a discomfiting exploration of the space as well as time between hand and backside and between innocence, purity and fault. His insights have also drawn insights from concepts between the occasions of a profound past as well as the present, from superficial disremembering to inscribing events that are humans's common destinies. This last aspect appears in the work as the portrait of an old man which pops up every now and then, flashing up any second, apparently unbidden, and every time with a different reason, for a different function, suggesting very different meanings.

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Citation:

[1] Hjorth, Ben. "Philosophies Of Non-Sense: Jan Svankmajer's *Jabberwocky*"; *Senses of cinema* 1, no. 71 (2014):1-10.

[2] Sera, Mareike. "On Analogical Thinking Jan Švankmajer's *Jabberwocky*." *Global Animation Theory* (2018): 29.

[3] Azcárate, Asunción López-Varela. "Transmedial Ekphrasis. From Analogic to Digital Formats." *International Journal of Transmedia Literacy (IJTL)* 1 (2015): 45-66.

[4] Marks, Peter. "Monsters and gods." In *Terry Gilliam*. Manchester University Press, 2017.

[5] Kérchy, Anna. *Alice in Transmedia Wonderland: Curiouser and Curiouser New Forms of a Children's Classic*. McFarland, 2016.

[6] Matteo, Ciastellardi, ed. *International Journal of Transmedia Literacy (IJTL)*. 1.1 December 2015. Vol. 1. LED Edizioni Universitarie, 2015.

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[8] Elliott, Richard. *The Sound of Nonsense*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2017.

[9] Doughty, Ruth, and Christine Etherington-Wright. *Understanding film theory*. Macmillan International Higher Education, 2017.

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[11] Kelen, Kit. "Where the Child Is Father—Republics, Expulsions, and the Rule (s) of Poetry: Exploring Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky"." In *Child Autonomy and Child Governance in Children's Literature*, pp. 76-93. Routledge, 2016.

[12] Stam, Robert. *Film theory: an introduction*. John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

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