

STRACH: CZECH HORROR

Dark wonders and the Gothic sensibility

Jan
Švankmajer's *Něco z Alenky (Alice,*
1987)

Švankmajer's films may not be straight horror, but they draw on Gothic literary sources and have a definite appeal to horror film fans, as **Brigid Cherry** explains.



Jan Švankmajer's work, and more specifically the animation and puppetry employed in his films, has been much discussed as art, particularly in terms of his position as "alchemist of the surreal." [1] Although his work remains little known, especially outside Europe, attention to his films has come from many different quarters, including an interest by fans of horror and vampire cinema. *Něco z Alenky (Alice, 1987)* in particular brought him coverage in the horror press, including magazines such as *Cinefantastique*, as well as smaller publications dedicated to vampire fiction and the Goth lifestyle.

Here the aspect of his work which most seems to appeal is not Švankmajer's contribution to eastern European surrealism, but his debt to the traditions of the Gothic. As is pointed out in the *Journal of the London Vampyre Group*, [2] he has made several films with Gothic themes, including shorts inspired by Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (filmed as *Otrantský zámek*, 1973/79) and Edgar Allen Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (*Zánik domu Usheru*, 1980) and *The Pit and the Pendulum* (*Kyvadlo, jáma a nadeje / The Pendulum, the Pit and Hope*, 1983).

The Zeitgeist

Něco z Alenky, Švankmajer's adaptation of Lewis Carroll's well-loved story *Alice In Wonderland*, tapped into the growing fascination with the dark side that marked a Gothic revival at the end of the twentieth century. As a children's tale for grown-ups it can be seen as part of the "full-blown resurgence of a 'Gothic' sensibility in contemporary art and culture." [3] It reflects the spirit of the age: "a mordant outlook along with chilly detachment and... pitch-black humour." [4] It looks back to the past, the "sombre and disturbing moods" [5] of the Gothic novel, and to the present, to the taste for "horror, madness, monstrosity, death, disease, terror, evil and weird sexuality" [6] of contemporary Gothic subculture.



Švankmajer: Appealing to the sense of wonder

If Švankmajer is on the "dark side of allegory, tapping the unconscious," [7] is it any wonder then that horror fans have picked up on his work? Certainly, it is an apt coincidence that *Cinefantastique* (which describes itself as "the American horror magazine with a sense of wonder") juxtaposes a feature on Švankmajer ("Puppetry's Dark Poet") with an article on one of the foremost writers and filmmakers of the fantastique, Clive

Barker ("Horror Visionary").[8]

Indeed, in its cast of characters and in its settings, *Něco z Alenky* resembles not so much Carroll's rural dreamworld wonderland, but Barker's urban Gothic nightmare wonderland of *Nightbreed* (1990), with its crypts and maze of rope walkways that are home to grotesque creatures. In the decaying cellars and winding stairs of *Něco z Alenky*'s underworld, the *wonderkabinett*—so lovingly recreated on celluloid many times by Švankmajer—is transformed into the Gothic castle.

In the maze of drawers and rooms within rooms, the china doll Alice is dwarfed as if by the Gothic spaces of the castle or cathedral, whilst the detritus of everyday life (buttons, shells, discarded socks, jars, furniture and fabrics) becomes the source of Gothic splendour. And as in *Nightbreed*, this underworld is peopled by nightmarish (not frightening and yet uncanny) creatures made of bone and dead flesh; in Philip Strick's words: "an unholy zoo." [9] These are creatures made by a Frankenstein, created from the disparate parts of other creatures and the offal of a butcher's shop, the wrong shape, the wrong size, obscenely large or mismatched. They are uncanny and they are abject, the very stuff of Gothic horror.

The Gothic revival

The Gothic, according to Wayne Drew, has been revived in contemporary horror cinema by filmmakers such as David Cronenberg.[10] Drew identifies patterns of obsession and fascination present in the stylistic texture, complex genesis and highly subversive subject matter of the Gothic novel. Rooted in cultural neuroses, the moral ambiguity and metaphysical complexity of the Gothic experience did not translate easily into the cinema. Rather, Drew identifies a Gothic shadow at the centre of the obsessions and neuroses of late twentieth-century western culture and sees it at work in the "clear call to the unconscious" of Cronenberg's body horror cinema.[11]

Although Švankmajer's work is firmly rooted in art—as opposed to exploitation—cinema, *Něco z Alenky* nevertheless contains similar echoes of the Gothic. The "nightmarish journey

undertaken by a small girl through a maze of subterranean vaults alive with the menace of the unforeseen and the abnormal"[12] is reminiscent of the nocturnal wanderings of the Gothic heroine, whilst the unforeseen and abnormal creatures she encounters are the apparitions that haunt her castle.

The hidden

Thus, Švankmajer "mines the concealed, with an anger and a sense of sabotage, to unlock surreal and ambiguous mythical vistas." [13] From its opening narration, an extreme close-up on Alice's mouth as she exhorts the viewer to "close your eyes, otherwise you won't see anything," *Něco z Alenky* foregrounds the hidden and the obscure: the "buried secrets, ancient and accursed." [14] The summer glade is stripped away to become, first, the cluttered playroom and then the dreamscape. The familiar, the childish clutter, becomes unfamiliar, the uncanny space of the child's mind. Space itself becomes distorted. Time replays. The cramped interior spaces of the table drawers through which Alice must squeeze and crawl open out into the dark, gloomy cellars and corridors of the Gothic space in which the wonderland itself is contained.



Distorted space: A "house within a house"

As Alice wanders in and out of basements and cellars, up and down stairs and corridors, all sense of space is lost. There is a

door within a door, a stream running through a field within a room, a stage set within the field, a house within the stage, another house behind the facade of a house made from children's wooden building blocks. Perhaps Alice encounters not a series of tables, but the same table—an endless Mobius loop. So time too rewinds and runs down. As the director himself has said: "What interests me about an object or a cinematic setting is not its artistic eloquence but what it is made of, what affects it and in what circumstances it is affected, and also how it is altered by time." [15]

Such nods to entropy speak not of a frozen cabinet of wonders in which strange artefacts are preserved; rather, the peeling paintwork, crackled varnish, yellowed paper and worn socks speak of the passage of time and the transformation of objects. And here, as elsewhere, is the morbid humour of the grotesque at work. Actions and scenes are re-enacted, the opening with Alice throwing pebbles into the river recreated with dolls in the playroom, the Mad Hatter's tea party replayed until it is exhausted and then replayed again. The onwards flow of time is both marked by the ticking of the White Rabbit's watch and stopped by the March Hare's jamming of the clockwork with an overzealous application of the best butter.

The transformed



Animate and inanimate in uncanny crossbreeds

The Gothic recognises the fluidity of identity and bodily integrity. The filmic techniques which Švankmajer employs to these ends help to create "a world of ambiguity, closing the gap between living creatures and inanimate objects." [16] Just as the grotesque and absurd merge into a wonderland of dark dreams, so animation conspires to conjoin the taxidermist's art, anatomical displays and pinned insects and dress them in the attire of Punchinello. Dead, dry leaves take on an uncanny life of their own, a chicken's egg rests within the ribcage of a skeletal fish creature as if waiting to be born, a skull drags a single horse's hoof behind it as though it were some failed, misshapen experiment.

Lost amongst this menagerie born of Gothic nightmare, the living Alice seems robotic. The inanimate is anthropomorphised; Švankmajer finds the life hidden within:

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. I don't actually animate objects. I coerce their inner life out of them—and for that animation is a great aid which I consider to be a sort of magical rite or ritual. [17]



Alice, manifested as a doll, under attack

Objects are thus ambiguous; transformation takes place at every

level. Rocks become biscuits, eggs contain dry bones, slabs of meat take flight, socks burrow through the floorboards like worms, pincushions turn into hedgehogs, bread rolls grow nails, jars of jam hide drawing pins. It is this ambiguity, at its strongest when Švankmajer plays with Alice's size not by having her shrink and grow large but by making her appearing as girl, doll and effigy, which only adds to the strong sense of the uncanny in the film.

The uncanny and the abject

Alice undergoes the fragmentation of personality of the Gothic novel. Her alter egos both stand in for and enclose Alice herself. Her sudden growth when she is attacked and thrown into the pail of milk at the White Rabbit's house within a house leaves her trapped inside her own effigy as she is dragged away by the creatures of bone. Like a nested Russian doll, she must escape from this *doppelgänger* tomb. Thus, the doubling of Gothic romance occurs not once, but twice, in the figure of Alice.

First as the live girl transforms and becomes the china doll; then as the effigy of Alice from which the child emerges once again. At such points, the rhythmical montage—what Jan Uhde calls "kinetic collage," [18] created by the extreme close-ups on Alice's mouth as she indicates who speaks interspersed between the longer shots, creates an uncanny effect. She becomes at once narrator and strange, disquieting object (the overall effect rendered all the more monstrously unreal by the lack of lip-sync in the dubbed English language version).

The Gothic foregrounds ruin and decay as emblematic of death. And just as the grotesque and the uncanny are strong elements of the film, so too is the abject. The wonderland creatures of *Něco z Alenky* are the undead. The stuffed rabbit, which comes to life pulling at the nails holding its feet to the floor of the display case, is truly abject. It hops and it walks, it is both animal and human. It is split open, its interior space doubling as a pocket to hold its watch, its sawdust innards constantly trickling away. When it pauses in its race against time, it is to eat a bowl of sawdust; it must feed on its own substance to continue its

illusion of life. Švankmajer's use of the close up which "precisely searches out every last scratch on the illusion"[19] reveals the decay at the heart of the wonderland.

In Švankmajer's hands, Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* itself becomes uncanny once again, the familiar made unfamiliar: "one has the unsettling sense of watching an old and well-remembered dream in a new and disturbing state of hallucination." [20] We should not be surprised then that the latter-day Goths, who elsewhere celebrate death, the morbid and the grotesque, admire the works of Švankmajer. It is really not surprising either that Švankmajer has turned to horror literature for the sources of his inspiration. *Něco z Alenky*, like the Gothic novel before it, examines the darker realms of being.

Footnotes

1. See, for example, Michael O'Pray (1986), "In the Capital of Magic", *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol 53, no 630, pp 218-219. O'Pray established the title for the 1986 Arts Council Film and Video Umbrella tour "The Alchemists of the Surreal: The Films of Jan Švankmajer and the Brothers Quay".
2. Birgit Gerhardt (1998), "Švankmajer: Death, Surrealism and Assorted perversions" in *The Chronicles*, no 9, pp 12-13.
3. Christoph Grunenberg (1997), "Unsolved Mysteries: Gothic Tales from Frankenstein to the Hair-eating Doll", in Grunenberg (ed), *Gothic: Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth Century Art*, (MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts), p 210.
4. Janet Maslin (1996), "The Years' Memorable Films Paint the World in Light Hues and Dark", *New York Times*, December 30 1996, p C12.
5. Grunenberg, op cit.
6. Bradford Morrow and Patrick McGrath (1991), "Introduction", in Morrow and McGrath (eds) *The New Gothic* (Vintage: New York), p xiv.

7. Dirk de Bruyn (2001), "Re-animating the Lost Objects d'Childhood and the Everyday: Jan Švankmajer", *Senses of Cinema*, vol 1, no 14. Accessed 1 December 2001.
8. *Cinefantastique*, vol 26, no 3, April 1994.
9. Philip Strick (1988), "Alice", *Monthly Film Bulletin*, no 658, November 1988, pp 319.
10. Wayne Drew (1984), "A Gothic Revival: Obsession and Fascination in the Films of David Cronenberg" in Wayne Drew (ed), *David Cronenberg Dossier*, BFI, pp 16-22.
11. Drew, p 17.
12. Strick, op cit.
13. de Bruyn, op cit.
14. Clive Barker quoted in Douglas E Winter (2001), *The Dark Fantastic*, Harper Collins, London, p 262.
15. Svankmajer quote taken from "The Magic Art of Jan Švankmajer" transmitted on BBC2, 1992, produced by Colin Rose, to mark "The Communication of Dreams" exhibition at Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, 12 March-5 April 1992.
16. Jan Uhde (1994), "Jan Švankmajer: The Prodigious Animator from Prague", *Kinema*, Spring 1994. Accessed 5 December 2001.
17. Švankmajer, op cit.
18. Uhde, op cit.
19. Švankmajer, op cit.
20. Strick, op cit.