

A Quick Chat with Jan Svankmajer and Eva Svankmajerová



by [Jason Wood](#)

Jason Wood: You seem to often work from myths and fairytales. How did the tale of Otesánek first come to your attention and what was it about it that made you feel that it was suitable for a film treatment?

Jan Svankmajer: I first started work on this particular myth in the middle of the 1980's when I wrote a story based on the myth. But even earlier than that, the story was brought to my attention by my wife Eva. Eva wanted to make an animation film from the story and it was a story that I too liked very much. It is true that I often work from old fairytales, which are narrated cosmological myths. This myth of Otesánek is a very old and basic myth of civilization that goes as far back as Faust and maybe even earlier. It concerns the rebellion against nature and the tragic consequences of that rebellion. I do not criticise that rebellion because you cannot live any dignified life without rebellion but I am just making sure that people understand the tragic dimensions of this particular rebellion. However, it is an imaginative film and I do not dictate the interpretation of the film. With this film and all my work, all and any interpretation is possible. I do not make films as theses; I do not simply have an idea that is present at the beginning that I then develop to its logical conclusion. Because the subconscious and the unconscious works throughout the film, at the end of the film I want to be like the viewer, looking at the work and thinking what have I done here? What is this about?

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JW: In your diary of the making of the film you describe in vivid detail many of your dreams. Your subconscious is a huge influence on your work.

JS: Absolutely. It is a priority. I actually prefer the term non-conscious. Whatever comes out of my subconscious I use it because I consider it to be the purest form, everything else in your conscious being has been influenced by reality, by art, by education and by your upbringing but the original experiences that exist within you are the least corrupted of all experiences. The real creation starts with the actual shooting of the film and obviously I do write a script and I do prepare but this is all very rational. When the filming process actually starts, then for me I am with the topic 24 hours a day, when I sleep, when I eat and when I am dreaming and that's when things first start truly coming. I don't shoot exactly according to the script, obviously I use this script for dialogue etc but it is during the shooting process that I can begin to incorporate these elements from my non-conscious, these elements are released into the work and I feel enrich it. So everyday when I start shooting I will look at what I had originally written and then basically write a new script for the day. Everywhere there will be new notes and new bits of paper. When you write the script you do not have the benefit of seeing the actors or of being on the set on the morning of the shoot to experience the mood, the make-up, the clothes that the actors are wearing. To only work from the original script would be a cold experience, it is only during the actual working process that you can truly create a film. If you are simply following script directions - even if they are your own - then it is simply process by numbers, you may as well be a civil servant. Obviously, during the political climate in the seventies and eighties in Czechoslovakia the script had to be approved at an early stage but of course the finished film would differ vastly from what was approved, which obviously caused problems with the authorities. Thankfully, the change in the political climate means that this approval process does not apply anymore.

JW: I wanted to ask Eva about the 2D animation fable that Alzbetka reads and what she feels this contributes to the film in a wider sense and how she feels about Jan 'stealing' her idea?

Eva Svankmajerová: He didn't really 'steal' it (laughs). He took it and developed it. I always had a need to tell really scary fairy tales. I had already worked on an earlier project of this nature - which to this day many children, including my own, still find too scary to look at - and Otesánek felt like perfect material. I gave the story to Jan to read and he liked it and was able to incorporate

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it into the wider fabric of the film.

JW: The fairytale I feel helps contextualise the story, especially in terms of both defining and developing the Alzbetka character.

JS: The fairytale is of course important in that while Alzbetka reads the tale she is the only one who knows the future and where the story is going. The myth has risen from the depths and brought itself to life, Alzbetka is trying to stop it, she wants to alter the outcome of the story - which is why she hides the old woman's hoe - but she is unable to alter it. The myth will proceed to its logical dimension. The film is also about the very power of the myth, and how we are still acting out and struggling with myths. The old lady is the only other one who reads the fairytale so she also takes on the role of fulfilling that myth and goes to do what the myth requires her to do. I however wanted to have something of an open ending, leaving some doubt as to whether she was able to fulfill the myth or not.

JW: Obviously you are best known for your integration of animation and live action but I think Little Otik differs from your other work slightly in the emphasis the film places on the performance of the actors. How did the actors come to your attention, particularly Kristina Adamcová who plays Alzbetka?

JS: I used many of the same actors for Alice. For the little girl I had a very specific image in mind, I wanted the girl - and the actress playing her - to look like Eva when she was eight to ten years old. To find this girl I visited many schools with my photographer and Eva and screen tested very many people. I decided after my experience on Alice that I definitely did not want a trained child actor because they are already compromised and corrupted by mannerisms. On the DVD of Little Otik there are many scenes of the tests with Adamcová that show how hard I made her work and how much better she became by the time she came to actually work on the film.

JW: I remember reading in your diary that you made her slog.

JS: (laughs) Sometimes I could have killed her!

JW: Jan and Eva's work together is obviously very collaborative.

ES: We are very happy to work together. Jan is lovely to work with and to be honest I would not want to work with any other director.

JS: I rely very much on Eva's work in terms of design and art in my films. For example we pulled up many tree stumps from many forests looking for what would be our Little Otik. We could not quite find what we wanted and had to go through various processes to arrive at what we wanted. Having said that, I would have been happy to use without any alteration a natural stump if we could have pulled one from the ground that exactly resembled what we wanted. Eva provides an authentic touch; this was very much in evidence with the puppets she helped create in *Conspirators of Pleasure*.

ES: The only downside of our working together of course is that Jan gets to see things when I am still in the process of making them and not strictly speaking when they are ready for his inspection. I did previously work with other directors but I never truly felt their reactions to what I had produced mattered. Jan's feelings have always mattered and meant a great deal to me.

JW: There are many themes that recur in your work and in the work of Surrealists in general. I'd like to concentrate on that of food and cannibalism. How do you feel that Little Otik expands this metaphor?

JS: You are right to notice that food is indeed one of my recurring themes. It is something of an obsession. I believe that obsessions are not to be repressed; they may often be all that we have. My obsession with food goes back to when I was a child because I was a non-eater and was sent to various feeding camps where they tried to fatten me up. It's funny, but when I showed *Faust* to my surrealist group one of them exclaimed 'for crying out loud, food again!' and I replied 'where?' as I had not even realised that food was so evident in the film. Little Otik is obviously in many ways about what is the absolute eater. It is important to notice that Otik does not just eat everything, he absolutely devours it and therefore it is a symbol about how our civilization feels the need to devour everything: ethnic groups, cultures. This film is about food, but it is more about devouring.

JW: You mentioned that you were a non-eater as a child; I've stopped eating since I began watching your films.

[JS Laughs]

JW: I particularly enjoyed the faux commercials that appear in your latest film. They make a strong point about the consumer culture in which we live.

JS: I believe that the consumer society is the final stage in civilization. The society can continue for another hundred years or so but I completely believe that this utilitarian, devouring way of life signals that civilization is

ending. I am not saying that mankind will die out but we are now watching the consequences of the end of the civilization that we have. Terrorism is nothing more than a consequence of the absolute inequality that we have in this cycle of civilization. Black humour is important and must remain one of the essences of the civilization. I mean the Americans are currently dropping bombs on Afghanistan and then immediately afterwards they are dropping food parcels.

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