

Manipulation: Jan Švankmajer's Animation Technique

and Criticism on Civilization

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Abstract

“Manipulation” is an important concept in the films of Jan Švankmajer, an influential Czech surrealist filmmaker. As a surrealist artist who aims for the liberation of humans from any kind of restraint, he insists that people should resist all kinds of societal manipulations. His insistent exposure of manipulation can be seen as a protest against its concealment as a convention. However, the idea of manipulation has more ambiguous meanings in his films. Švankmajer brings inorganic objects to life through careful manipulations, such as stop-motion animation, while applying the same techniques to humans to disrupt their identities. Consequently, both humans and objects are represented as puppets: humans as quasi-objects and objects as quasi-autonomous things. These hybrid puppets expose the contradicting nature of human beings, perpetually in the tension between freedom and restraint.

Keywords: Czech-Slovak Surrealism⁺⁺ Manipulation, Puppets, Stop-motion Animation, Surrealist Film, Jan Švankmajer, Animation

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⁺⁺ In more recent years, the term Czech-Slovak Surrealism is being used more than the older Czechoslovakian Surrealism after Czechoslovakia split into two countries: Slovakia and the Czech Republic in 1993.

Introduction

This paper examines the films of Jan Švankmajer (1934-) and the concept of manipulation, which plays a significant role in his works. Švankmajer is a Czech visual artist who has created many provocative artworks in various media, including mixed-media sculptures, collages, and assemblages. He is most renowned as a filmmaker, especially for his unique visual style and use of stop-motion animation. The worlds his films depict are inhabited by bizarre images of creeping inanimate objects, raw meat crawling in mud, or violently transfigured human bodies made from clay. He is regarded as a “cult director,” and he has influenced other filmmakers such as the Quay Brothers, Terry Gilliam, and Darren Aronofsky.

Extraordinarily creative visual expressions reinforced by a technique of stop-motion animation are the hallmark of Švankmajer's films. His creations emerge from a combination of his Czech cultural background and his involvement with the Czechoslovakian surrealist movement since the late 1960s. Though surrealism tends to be thought of as an outdated art movement, it provides a wide-ranged artistic field of collective and individual experiments that bridge inner reality and social reality by disturbing conventional systems of representation. In Czechoslovakia, where artists were under severe pressure of censorship from the Communist government, the surrealist sphere allowed acute critiques of power in society and of every kind of convention. The Czech surrealism is much older, beginning in the late 20s.

Švankmajer's films are among the most marvellous products of Czech-Slovak surrealism. In recent years, Švankmajer's place in visual art history and many themes associated with the elements in his films have been discussed. Nevertheless, the concept of manipulation and its role in his work does not seem to be fully appreciated, despite its significance to his creations. Manipulation is the key concept that connects Švankmajer's personal motifs – fantasies and anxieties in his childhood, his interest in the tactile, a disgust for food and eating habits, and the latent life in inorganic objects – and transforms them into a sharp critique of social reality. It is a theme in which he has been interested more than anything else (Švankmajer, 1997). This paper examines the meaning of the concept in his films and elucidates part of his surrealist critique of social reality as the modern circumstances surrounding human beings.

After a brief explanation of the circumstances of the Czech surrealist movement to which Švankmajer belongs, I will examine his individual films and statements. His conviction that all sorts of manipulations must be resisted characterizes most of his work in not only narrative but also filmmaking style; his work often disrupts cinematic conventions through manipulation in filmmaking. For the most part, he treats manipulation as a heavy limitation of freedom, but another viewpoint on the issue can be seen in his use of stop-motion animation.

Czech-Slovak Surrealism

Švankmajer's expressions are primarily informed by surrealism, a European modernist art movement. Although surrealists have created significant works, particu-

larly in the realm of visual art, the movement is a complex one that also includes literature, politics, and philosophy. In fact, surrealists can be said to engage almost every issue of social representations by introducing dreams, the unconscious, and disruptions of signification into their creative activities. The movement began in Paris around the 1920s with the poet Andre Breton and his colleagues and since has spread around the world, even to non-European countries such as the United States, Japan, Egypt, and Turkey. Czechoslovakian surrealism in particular has a long, unique history. Members of the avant-garde Devetsil established the first Czechoslovakian surrealist group in the 1930s. This first generation included poet Vítězslav Nezval, art theoretician and designer Karel Teige, world famous painter Toyen (Marie Cermínová), and her partner visual artist Jindřich Štienský. Though political shuffling within the country has led to some breakups and reunions, Czech-Slovak surrealism continues to be active, and members produce significant artworks, literature, and collective experiments which are published in their periodical ANALOGON. Additionally, they often collaborate with surrealist groups and individuals in England, France, Sweden, Spain, and Greece. In February 2012, they held a large exhibition in Prague titled Jiný Vzduch (Other Air), which summarized their activities and collaborations with other European surrealist groups over the past 20 years; Švankmajer was a participant in this exhibition (Srp, 1996).

Švankmajer and his wife Eva joined the Czechoslovakian surrealists in 1969 after meeting Vratislav Effenberger, a poet who was a central member of the group. Since then, surrealist ideas, sensibilities, and their spirit of resistance have played crucial roles in Švankmajer's work. His way of adapting his dreams, childhood experiences, and fantasies into his work stems directly from typical surrealist methods. He describes surrealism as "a journey into the depths of the soul" (Hames, 2008:112). By using a surrealist approach, his rather personal motifs are sublimated into sharp critiques of civilizations, societies, and the human condition. To understand such critique in his work, it is necessary to consider the idea of manipulation, a concept rooted in his childhood memory and his circumstances during the Cold War era, which consistently plays a significant part in his filmmaking.

Narrative on Manipulation

In Švankmajer's view, "manipulation" means every kind of binding force that controls human behavior. He insists human beings are fundamentally manipulated by society, advertising, their suppressed desires, and belief in fate (Akatsuka, 1999). He believes that humans must resist all types of manipulations, and these ideas deeply affect his work. In his films, the protagonists do not seem to control their own behavior; rather, they move as if by some other force. Particularly in feature films such as *Lunacy* or *Little Otik*, his protagonists, who are fated to a dark ending, have stiffened facial expressions and always seem seized with tension.

The most apparent example of a manipulated protagonist is seen in Švankmajer's second feature film, *Faust*, created in 1993. Manipulation is the central theme of this film. Its protagonist, a seemingly ordinary Czech man played by Petr Cepek, is caught as a living puppet within the Czech puppet play of Doctor Faust. The city of Prague is fantastically intermingled with the play. The protagonist goes from

backstage to a crowded pub through a restroom; a puppet representing the devil runs back and forth between the stage and the crowded street. Particularly in the latter sequence, a devil is released and summoned repeatedly by a clown who is a servant of Faust, and he must repeatedly come and go between the stage and the street. Drama and reality are combined in the film, so the protagonist never can stop being a puppet and leave the stage; that is, he can never escape his manipulated circumstance. He tries to exit the stage, but he is always surrounded by people conspiring to bring him back as a living puppet. Ultimately, the protagonist is freed from his manipulated circumstance only by death in a car accident.

The narrative of *Faust* illustrates the manipulative power of human relationships in urban, civilized life. Urban life is a play, and the actor's role is assigned through his relationship to other members of the community. At the same time, a kind of transcendental power is implied as an unseen puppeteer, possibly the "manipulations of society, suppressed desires and belief in fate" that Švankmajer has described. In any event, Švankmajer shows the tragic aspects of an urban man who cannot escape his manipulated circumstances.

Manipulation and Filmmaking Processes

Švankmajer's concern with manipulation is also seen in his stylistic approach to filmmaking. In general, manipulation is an indispensable part of making a film. Its structure is achieved through many sorts of manipulation, including cinematography, editing, and script development. Every shot is constructed through manipulation, but most films conceal the manipulative processes to keep audiences unaware of what happens to create a particular scene. If films fail to conceal such processes, audiences stop being immersed or engaged in the movie experience.

Contrary to this entertainment approach, Švankmajer often seems to deliberately expose traces of the cinematic process. His trademark style of montage, seen in *Conspirators of Pleasure*, *Picnic with Weissmann*, and many of his early short films, combines extraordinary close-up shots and fragmented cuts. These techniques prevent spectators from experiencing normal, sequential space-time continuity in the film. His disruptive combination of excessively emphasized surfaces of objects hangs the film unsteadily between the real and the artificial, between a lifelike experience and a product of precise manipulations. Exposing manipulative processes of filmmaking goes against filmic conventions. For instance, montages such as those in Hitchcock's films, in which a sequence progresses from a long shot of a town to the interior of the protagonist's room, provide a traditional system of "reading" filmic images that allow film viewers to remain unaware of editing processes. Švankmajer's montages deviate from these conventions, leaving spectators in an uncertain state. They are forced to see significantly vivid textures of objects while also being acutely aware of the editing manipulations that construct the scene. Švankmajer's cinematic construction can be regarded as a protest against the social conventions that conceal manipulations among human beings. Moreover, from the filmmaker's statement that human beings must resist all types of manipulations, his thematic concerns such as that in the narrative of *Faust* can be seen to echo this assertion.

Cultural and ideological circumstances in Czechoslovakia are clearly related to his attitude. Under the totalitarian state, artists were officially forced to adhere to a socialist ideology, while surrealists such as Švankmajer continued to resist until democratization. In those days, the group was forced into clandestine activities under the severe censorship of communist government after the failure of the liberalization movement of the 1960s. Public gathering was almost impossible in that era, but Švankmajer and his surrealist colleagues maintained their collective games and spontaneous experiments secretly, until the democratization came in 1989. These games were a central activity of the group, and their keen artistic resistance of cultural suppression (Fijalkowski, 2005:5). Under such circumstances, Švankmajer would have been deeply aware of the power of a system of civilization that suppresses and manipulates its own people. Such power is exercised not only by the nation and the government but also by ordinary citizens.

Švankmajer's creations could be interpreted to simply intend to release human beings from such manipulation, but an examination of his famous images of living objects demonstrates that the situation is far more complicated.

Living Objects and Puppets

Švankmajer stated that every object has its own life, and he invokes these lives through the stop-motion technique; in his own words, to let them speak (Richardson, 2006:128). Some of his short films show animated objects brilliantly moving and playing, independent from their utility to the human hands from which they originate. In *Picnic with Weissmann*, created in 1968, a desk bulges with a ball, two chairs play soccer, and a hungry pair of pyjamas hunger relaxes on a bed. In 1971's *Jabberwocky*, a chest runs down on a hill, and a pocketknife hops and dances on a table.

These objects' unrestrained behavior keenly contrasts with images of people, who look inert, suppressed, or manipulated, such as those in *Food*, created in 1992. The film is divided into three sections, each named for a meal. "Breakfast" is the story of men who are used as a machine to serve a meal. In "Lunch," a rich man and a poor man eat their clothes as well as the table and chairs. "Dinner" features people who eat their own body parts. Humanity is deliberately disrupted through these dark, shocking narrative strands. Many filming techniques are used, including clay animation, but the most notable thing is that the actors are shot in stop-motion (or pixilation) throughout the film, making them look like soulless bodies moving robotically.

As an animation technique, stop-motion cannot be achieved without delicate manipulative processes. Things are shot frame by frame with minute shifts made by the operator's hand. Thus, images constructed with stop-motion have definite signs of disconnection between each frame, which can be seen as marks of manipulation. Furthermore, with this technique of manipulation, objects seem to come to life, whereas people turn into objects. The distinctions between living things and artificial ones and between objectivity and subjectivity are disturbed here. As a result, Švankmajer's concept of manipulation takes on a more ambiguous mean-

ing in his use of animation. At this point, the idea of a puppet, a thing situated somewhere between the human and the artificial, supplies a helpful construct.

“Puppet” is an important motif in both surrealism and the traditional Czech art world. Puppet theatre played a crucial role in protecting the Czech language and culture during the Habsburg reign (Hames, 2008:84). Many companies and theatres of puppetry still exist throughout the Czech Republic. Moreover, puppets, as a mystical mimic of human figures, have been a subject of keen interest by modernist artists. Their ambiguity has also fascinated surrealists for some time, as evidenced by the display of objects and assemblages of mannequins as far back as a 1938 Paris surrealist exhibition. Even Švankmajer started his career in puppet theatre; he was a graduate of the Department of Puppetry at the Prague Academy of Performing Arts. His interest in manipulation stemmed from an encounter with a small puppet-theatre kit in his early childhood; he later said that this encounter went on to influence his entire oeuvre (Akatsuka, 1999).

Since his first film *The Last Trick* in 1964, Švankmajer has used many kinds of puppets. Examples include the manipulated protagonist in *Faust. Lunacy*, released in 2005, has a suggestive sequence of meat puppets that dance on a traditional Czech-style stage. Aside from these direct examples, Švankmajer seems to treat everything in his films as puppets, quasi-objects and quasi-humans, through his stop-motion technique. He makes the objects more alive and people more inert by treating them as puppets. In other words, there are no simple humans or objects in his films. Instead, he depicts images of hybrid puppets manipulated by invisible strings: witness Little Otik, a tree-root monster shaped like a baby, something between a human and an object.

Thus, manipulation illustrates a paradox of life in that it serves as a fundamental restraint to humans but at the same time breathes life into inanimate objects or rather enables them to be seen as alive among people. It also demonstrates a fundamental problem of the human condition, namely that manipulation enables life, meaning that human life can never be free of all manipulative power. Perhaps such an idea may be related to the idea set out by Michel Foucault of bio-power, a kind of manipulative power that enables people to live in civilized society. Švankmajer's use of animation visually exposes such contradicting circumstances of human life in a civilized world through a surrealist lens.

This discussion raises important questions: Is it possible to achieve liberation from manipulation? Can we reach a state of freedom? What is freedom? What is liberation? The surrealists of the 1920s seemed to believe in a state of ultimate freedom that would be brought about through all kinds of expression with unrestrained imagination. However, in 1994, Švankmajer wrote in his diary, “Freedom doesn't exist. There is only a process of liberation, but we can never escape from our tragic fate. Liberation just makes our tragic fate coherent, and makes our life sufficient, enjoyable and meaningful” (Švankmajer, 1997). Though he seems more pessimistic than the Parisian surrealists, his attitude can also be seen as appropriately directed toward postmodern realities. The total revolution never seems

to be possible, but negotiations and even betrayal are still possible. In this way, Švankmajer's ambiguous "puppets" also seem to betray the manipulative circumstances around themselves and to drive the process of liberation.

Conclusion

Through images of hybrid-puppets and his construction of animated films as a hybrid puppet theatre, Švankmajer draws vividly upon the contradictory relationship of living things and manipulative powers in society. In this way, his work becomes a critical exposure of social conditions of human beings involved in a never-ending conflict between manipulation and freedom. He visually and violently forces his audiences to be aware of this circumstance of life and asserts his strong refusal to surrender to manipulation.

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