

## **MICHAEL NOTTINGHAM**

### **Downing the Folk-Festive: Menacing Meals in the Films of Jan Svankmajer**

Jan Svankmajer is perhaps best known as an animator of clay figures and marionettes who casts his creations in stories adapted from or inspired by gothic or central European folk literature. Svankmajer's films are immediately recognisable by their inanimate actors' stylised gestures, movement and appearance, yet they also have in common a less obvious thematic signature in their overriding fixation with the oral and in particular their recurrent images of food and consumption.

Svankmajer has said of this, "I was a non-eating child—my mother always forced me to eat."<sup>1</sup> While personal experience no doubt plays an important role in the gestation and realisation of his narratives—Svankmajer has often credited his childhood as an important if not his major well of ideas—one suspects there is more to this than he is letting on. An examination of his work suggests other influences, including the Czech variants of surrealism and communist censorship that he was to embrace and suffer respectively, as well as the aesthetic and ideological underpinnings of the grotesque and

folk-festive, which characterise much of his early central European and gothic source material.

Since 1964, Svankmajer has been making films—primarily short films, but more recently a handful of feature-length efforts—that combine stop-motion animation with live action to uncanny and often blackly humorous effect. A self-described “militant surrealist,” Svankmajer’s efforts extend beyond the screen to the graphic and plastic arts—in fact, he practised only these between 1972 and 1979 when state censors forbade him to make films. These continue to interrelate not only with each other but also with his celluloid work. The term “practitioner” would probably sit better with Svankmajer than “artist,” which is seen as too limiting a niche for surrealists, for whom Svankmajer says “the means of expression are interchangeable.”<sup>2</sup>

Surrealism, although a discursive idiom even in its more esoteric Czech variant, inherits much from romanticism and, consequently, from the grotesque. Romanticism’s emphasis on the spontaneity of the creative act and the validity of subjective experience made it in some ways a forerunner of surrealism, while its intermingling of styles (unrestrained in comparison to classical precedents), its emphasis on ambiguity and its adoption of certain aspects of folk culture (particularly in the second school of German romanticism) evidenced its roots in the grotesque. Surrealism anticipates and bears the indicia of the postmodern in both its disruptive and ambivalent qualities, but it also recalls some of the fundamental principles of the grotesque in its use of collage, which Breton in his preface to the 1921 Paris exhibition of Max Ernst’s work, compared to the poetic metaphor—the comparison of like with unlike (the union of two widely separated realities) to achieve inspiration and understanding.<sup>3</sup> Max Ernst and Hans Arp’s

*Physiomythological Diluvian Picture*, for example, depicts a half-man, half-bird subject with a branch growing out of its posterior—a grotesque figure if ever there was one.

Critic Philip Thomson notes that Lautréamont's chance meeting of a sewing-machine and an umbrella on the operating table is as valid an example of the grotesque as it is of the surreal in that it relies on a mixture of incompatibles, "the sudden placing of familiar elements of reality in a peculiar and disturbing light." This also anticipates Freud's theories of the uncanny, which are well rehearsed in the dark, uneasy confines of Svankmajer's stories. Thomson also mentions Kayser's use of marionettes as examples of the grotesque in that they confuse animate and inanimate objects, a reference that even more clearly evokes the uncanny as well as an uneasy, tense humour that conforms to Breton's black ideal:

Human-like, animated yet actually lifeless objects, they are apt to be simultaneously comical and eerie—comical because of their imperfect approximation to human form and behaviour, eerie probably because of age-old, deep-rooted fears in man of animated and human-like objects.<sup>4</sup>

But it is Mikhail Bakhtin's critical analysis of the carnivalesque in *Rabelais and His World* that is of particular interest in relation to Svankmajer. Svankmajer's films are rife with references to the folk-festive, the jubilant world-view that persisted up until and, in certain rural areas, even into the industrial age. The folk-festive based identity not in hierarchically established societal roles but in the unrestrained spontaneity of the masses and their means of inverting authority through irreverent, base humour and folk traditions rooted in an agrarian heritage. References to the folk-festive in Svankmajer's films include the marionette theatre, hyperbolised distortion (or destruction) of the body, and, in particular, images of food and of the mouth.

In many of Svankmajer's films all three of these instances of the folk-festive appear in a single scene, and sometimes are represented in a single image, as in one of the more viscerally effective animated scenes in Svankmajer's feature-length *Faust* (1994). When Lucifer finally convinces Faust to sign the compact for his soul using a pen inked with his own blood, the huge wooden head of an angelic marionette is suddenly pictured rolling through an orderly garden and then onto the scene. From its mouth emerge dozens of tiny angels, who fly up and wrest the pen from Faust's hand, snapping it in two. In response the wooden head of a grotesque demon is pictured rolling onto the scene—but its route is via the wilderness. From this devil's mouth fly miniature winged demons, who grasp another feathered pen and place it in Faust's hand. The angels quickly wrest it again and snap it in two. This goes back and forth a few times until the tiny demons attack the tiny angels *en masse*, dismember them and begin raping some of them. A few bedraggled and bleeding angels survive and crawl back into the giant angel head, which rolls off. Meanwhile, Faust has signed the compact, which the devils roll up and take with them back into their grotesque vehicle as it rolls back into the wilderness and into a dark grotto.

The battle between the angels and devils is certainly a grotesque, almost Rabelaisian scene. The humour is decidedly black, however. There is no feast following the battle, there is no carnivalesque debasement—only Faust's meaningless playtime with his powers, which yield him no greater knowledge than before his damnation. The lack of meaning here is the same sort of absence that configures the relationship between the modern/post-modern individual and the empty shells of folk-festive forms. Perhaps there

is nothing to identify with—no collective, no high or low, only the absurdity of the situation, which can grant a few laughs, at least.

Svankmajer's texts, whether his own or adaptations of romantic/gothic authors such as Goethe, Carroll or Poe, are more often than not evocative of this earlier, and very central European, vision of Europe, both in their narratives and their *mise en scène*. His treatments of forms that have folk-festive associations, however, deny them any "festive" quality. Instead, his films reflect a surrealist approach that marries bleak existentialism with the absurd, replacing Bakhtin's emphasis on joviality and the carnivalesque with the black humour much lauded by Breton.

Bakhtin's interpretation of Rabelais posits the material bodily lower stratum—the brute reality of the material as both womb and tomb—as evidence of the immortality of the renewing principle of humanity. By investing his or her identity more in the collective, by effectively identifying with the brotherhood of humanity, the individual could effectively laugh death in the face. "All for all, and one for all" would be the motto of a folk-festive version of *The Three Musketeers*. Through the celebratory rituals of the carnivalesque and marketplace humour, the high and the low, authority and the commoner, were (in simple, concise and saccharine terms) mutually enriched and united in a meaningful relationship based on common humanity and the good of the many.

Aside from having at the core of its genesis the rise of the individual, however, modernity hasn't proven terribly hospitable to positive notions of brotherhood. Having seen World Wars, the Holocaust and Stalin—not to mention a lot of existentialist literature—the bleak *zeitgeist* before the Spring of Prague (or shortly thereafter) was driven by cold reality, not intellectual fashion. (Surrealism was itself, in rather simplistic

terms, a reaction to the rationalism that the movement's members saw as responsible for leading to the atrocities of the First World War.) Svankmajer doesn't expropriate the grotesque of its happier face or divest it of the festive—history has done this. What Svankmajer does is invest such forms with a menace—albeit a menace with an evil grin—appropriate in a society where the promise of universal brotherhood has been betrayed by a dystopian totalitarian state—Big Brother instead of brotherhood. The short *Death of Stalinism in Bohemia* (1990) is a very direct example of this, with its depiction of humanity as the product of an assembly line where mass production quickly recycles the end-product back into a mass grave from which it creates new expendables.

The Czech surrealists themselves, with their emphasis on cooperative group activity and aesthetic interdependence, might offer a constructive model for the concept of the collective. Svankmajer's artistic 'experiments' in tactilism, meanwhile, attempt to employ materiality in the service of surrealism and its investigation of the everyday life of ordinary objects. These are palliative attempts, perhaps, to address the sober truths that inhabit his films, where the individual is at the mercy of a world full of hostile objects and unseen forces.

An examination of the use of food as image and metaphor in Svankmajer's films will demonstrate how its original identification as a source of abundance, renewal and a symbol of brotherhood can—as a fetish or symbol of its own lack, its function as tool and commodity, its various distortions—appropriate the hollowed shell of grotesque violence and invert to become an absurd emblem of isolation and death. Its portrayal through the use of stop-motion animation invokes the marionette theatre—and many films directly

use marionettes—and also poses questions about the relation of the animate to the inanimate, and thereby our own relation to the inanimate and our negotiations with death.

### **Festive humour and the folk vs. black humour and the surreal**

In *Rabelais and his World*, Mikhail Bakhtin analyses the age-old system of carnival in which popular folk forms using festive laughter and the grotesque had an important social role that subsequently receded with the Enlightenment. For Rabelais, the festive laughter of the carnivalesque temporarily dispelled the boundaries between the sacred and profane, the official and the unofficial, erasing hierarchy and revealing the joyful endurance of the base and procreative element of humanity. Popular festive forms included abundant feasts, bloody massacres, exaggerated bodily dimensions and a fixation with the sexual and with ordure.

The forms of humour that this system employed stressed the “joyous superabundance” of humanity and an emphasis on collective versus individual reality. The collective and its resilient presence in the fecund “material bodily lower stratum” allowed the individual to escape the fear that so dominated the rigidly stratified and oppressive society of Rabelais’ era. Bakhtin writes,

The birth of the new, of the greater and the better, is as indispensable as the death of the old. The one is transferred to the other; the better turns the worse into ridicule and kills it. In the whole of the world and of the people there is no room for fear. For fear can only enter a part that has been separated from the whole, the dying link torn from the link that is born.<sup>5</sup>

Which is, of course, why the disconnect of the individual, the modern condition of isolation, supplants the festive with fear. The myth of progress having long since been shattered, many central symbols of meaning are empty vessels. These formerly festive

forms of expression survive in the form of a black rather than regenerative, lighthearted humour. The humour is a reaction that Andre Breton cites in his essay on Lewis Carroll, writing that

the intelligent mind will react to the inconceivable or unacceptable situation by embracing the absurd. There is nothing that intelligent humor cannot resolve in gales of laughter, not even the void.... Laughter...stands at the lip of the void, offers us the void as a pledge.<sup>6</sup>

According to Polizzotti, “despite the very modern aspect of black humor, the concept itself dates back well before Breton’s definition of it, to Jonathan Swift at the beginning of the eighteenth century.”<sup>7</sup> Swift was already listed in the 1924 Manifesto as being “surrealist in malice” and Breton dubs him humour’s “true initiator”. Bakhtin, however, sees Swift as the representative of a sterile, lifeless humour that found its opposite in Rabelais’ festive humour, whereas Breton for his part remarks that “Swift shared to the smallest possible degree Rabelais’ taste for innocent, heavy-handed jokes and his constant drunken good humor.”<sup>8</sup> Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*, in which he proposes that the problem of too many orphans be solved by selling them as meat, is an example of black humour that is particularly relevant to our subject for both its reference to food and its incorporation of violence.

In his introduction to Breton’s *Anthology of Black Humor*, translator and critic Mark Polizzotti paraphrases Breton’s definition of black humour, identifying it as the opposite of joviality, wit or sarcasm, being instead

a partly macabre, partly ironic, often absurd turn of spirit that constitutes the ‘mortal enemy of sentimentality,’ and beyond that a ‘superior revolt of the mind’ .... It was Vache who provided Breton with his first definition of humor as it applies here—‘a sense...of the theatrical (and joyless) pointlessness of everything.’<sup>9</sup>

Breton himself attributes to black humour “a principle of total insubordination ...undermining the world...reducing everything that then seemed all-important to a petty scale, desecrating everything in its path.”<sup>10</sup> This almost absurdist definition finds a parallel in the abusive, uncrowning dynamic of festive humour, but without its subsequent positive renewal.

The folk-festive’s function of disrupting hierarchies has a parallel in black humour, although the latter dispenses with the subsequent renegotiation of hierarchical relations. In his second manifesto on surrealism, Breton insists on his understanding of surrealism as a way into a mental world of endless possibility, “a certain point in the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and present, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, cease to be perceived as contradictions.”<sup>11</sup> It thus parallels the carnivalesque by operating on the liminal level and addressing the same inadequacies of the established societal and ideological models.

### **Mouthing dissent and table talk: the theme of economies versus free expression**

Svankmajer clearly undermines Bakhtin’s assertion that “Bread and wine have their own truth, their own irresistible tendency toward superabundance. They have the indestructible connotation of victory and merriment.”<sup>12</sup> The archaic, preindustrial meaning of abundance and the conception of time as measured by the agricultural and astrological calendar rather than the wristwatch cannot be sustained in forms so changed in cultural context. For Svankmajer’s purposes, the relevant contexts are existentialism, authoritarian communism, and the consumer culture that replaced it following the Velvet Revolution. Folk traditions inherent in the texts he adapts, as well as his use of the Czech

marionette tradition, are given a dichotomy of content and form—using original forms, but ones whose meaning has been shifted, the joyful collective having been replaced with a much more negative understanding of community. The modern manifestation of these forms incorporates an existential disconnect, a continued dominance of the collective, but one in which hierarchy has not been ruptured but is relentlessly oppressive. For Svankmajer this is, above all, the authoritarian state.

The consumption so central to the folk-festive is also central to the political and economic ideologies that are at least indirectly a major theme of many of Svankmajer's films. While his humorous treatment of the body and materiality, which is decidedly black, emerges from the surrealist aesthetic ideology, it is also directly influenced by the period of 'normalisation' in Czechoslovakia under communism, which had a profound effect on most levels of Czech society. Food is a particularly appropriate and ironic form to employ because of the collectivised agriculture associated with the Stalinist regime. Although there was never collectivised farming in Czechoslovakia on the same devastating scale as in, say, the Russian steppes, it was still very much on the minds of people who, under communism, often saw rationing of goods.

An early Svankmajer short, *The Flat* (1968), highlights the role of food as an instrument of control imputed by authority. It features a tenant trapped in an apartment where a tempting but uneatable meal has been left for him. His fork bends; his soup spoon is riddled with holes, practically a sieve; his wedge of bread has been hollowed out by a voracious mouse; his meat is devoured by a pack of hungry dogs that burst from his wardrobe; his hard boiled egg is indestructible. War between a protagonist and inanimate objects is the theme of many a Charlie Chaplin film, yet here the slapstick is on a sourer

note, the struggle of the vulnerable individual with malevolent external forces too foregrounded to allow easy laughs. The protagonist's situation here, trapped in the flat, is particularly Kafkaesque in both its existential quality and its black humour, and it also mirrors the socio-political condition of both the artist and the everyman in communist Czechoslovakia.

Bakhtin writes that "Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination...all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world...the beginning and the end of life are closely linked and interwoven." In eating,

the body transgresses... its own limits.... Man's encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself.... In the oldest system of images, food was related to work. It concluded work and struggle and was their crown of glory.... Human labour's encounter with the world and the struggle against it ended in food, in the swallowing of that which had been wrested from the world.<sup>13</sup>

But labour and food were collective, with people working together and then feasting together. The protagonist of *The Flat* is not only denied a meal, but also denied the company of fellow diners.

*Faust* similarly features a scene that is in many ways an inversion of the folk-festive feast and of prandial truth (table talk). Two ghoulish antagonists are shown lapping up a meal silently, with close-ups on the stew magnifying it to grotesque proportions. Nothing is said, nothing is communicated, but a mysterious package is left with Faust, the contents of which lead him to lies and perdition rather than the truth and health associated with the feast. If the ritual of eating is made separate, part of private life, nothing remains of the old images—the only collective model that remains is the collectivised farm.

The mouth is, of course, more than just an orifice for ingestion (or burping, which is also under the rule of the grotesque). It also articulates the rational and expressive—which are not necessarily the same by any means. Svankmajer comments on the sorry state of free expression in communist Czechoslovakia, sometimes directly and at other times more indirectly.

In *Alice* (1988), his first feature length film and an adaptation of the famous Lewis Carroll story, the “drink me” bottle contains ink, which when drunk reduces Alice to a state of vulnerability. A potential emblem of the press or written expression, ink should empower, but in a society built on censorship and oppression (both of which stung Svankmajer for the many years he was effectively banned), it translates to risk, compromise and vulnerability.

In *A Quiet Week in the Country* (1969)—a trilogy of sorts, like the later *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982), but seen through a keyhole aperture by an unidentified man—the dangers of expression loom even greater. In the first segment, wrapped sweets emerge from an old tin and begin unwrapping themselves only to reveal rusty old screws. These migrate onto an old typewriter, one to a key, with the sharp end of each screw pointing up so that writing would be a painful process, implying injury as a possible consequence of free speech. In the second vignette, a disembodied tongue slides out of a hole in the wall, visits a washbasin to lick out the insides of some dirty pots, and finally inserts itself in a mincer, where it is ground into small scrolls of newsprint. This seems to imply that, while it can be difficult to get published anywhere, it might end up being a posthumous process in certain societies. The third “dialogue” of the trilogy of animated shorts *Dimensions of Dialogue* features the clay heads of two men, facing each other.

They play a game of alternately sticking out their tongues at each other, each time with an object at the tip of the tongue. When the objects agree, there is no crisis. But when the objects are jarringly incompatible, or even mutually destructive, the situation degenerates into a bizarre, obsessive hyperbole of the game “rock, paper, scissors.” The scenario demonstrates the nature of both the surreal and the grotesque as incongruous assemblages of objects break down the normative constructs. It also points to the difficulties and dangers of communication on an intimate, vulnerable level.

In Rabelais’ world, the mouth is the means of expressive exchange that facilitates community, as well as the point of negotiation with the earth through nourishment, and the spirit-world through the breath. The folk-festive conception of food is as an emblem of popular empowerment, not ancillary but central to the potential for inverting social hierarchies. In Svankmajer’s universe, authority has turned the tables. Divested of its traditionally positive connotations, the oral is here denoted by lack: lack of communication, lack of abundance, lack of connection.

### **Camporesi, the Underworld and the Alchemy of the Laughter, the Feast and Death**

Food also represents the negotiations between self and other, interior and exterior, through its uneasy relationship to excrement. Food is ultimately transformed into excrement, which in turn will fertilize the soil for the production of more food. Excrement is the underworld, the lower, meeting the sunlight from above to form the life that inhabits an intermediary reality.

In *The Magic Harvest: Food, Folklore and Society*, Piero Camporesi writes that

the relationship between nutrition and defecation is fundamental in a culture based on physiology and nature, a civilization ruled by the ideology of excrement, recognizing the indispensable supremacy of manure.<sup>14</sup>

This polarity of opposites is but one of many noted while unpacking this heaviest of symbols, bread, the “primary, fundamental element, the absolute food.”<sup>15</sup> A parallel set of polarities is also apparent in his characterisation of the analogous concerns of light and darkness, fertility and corruption. Bread symbolises sunlight, for example, which “magically fecundates the earth,”<sup>16</sup> keeping the underworld and its encroaching darkness at bay.

The mouth itself is also connected to the underworld and to the soul. The Greeks believed the dead could only cross the river Styx with a coin in the mouth, while old wives’ tales held that a cat could steal the breath of a baby or that a sneeze represented momentary possession. Most cultures have believed at one point or other that the soul exited the body through the mouth at death or, possibly, in a trance. Food and the mouth figure in myth in relation to the underworld: Milton made the worst punishment, for betrayal, to be chewed in the mouth of the devil, while Dante wrote paradoxically that the only exit from hell was through Lucifer’s mouth. Persephone was forced to spend half the year in Hades because she ate six pomegranate seeds. The examples are many.

In *Faust*, Svankmajer makes numerous references to the Underworld and to the spiritual aspects of food and orality, bringing these concepts more closely together. For instance, Faust finds an egg in the middle of a loaf of bread. When the egg, the objectification of the narrative intersection of real and unreal, is cracked open the forces of darkness (or at least strangeness) are unleashed. He later also finds a key in his food that leads him further down the road to perdition.

Camporesi notes that peasants baked their loaves of bread in a variety of different shapes, but that nearly all embodied the female or male reproductive principle. There were not only phallic loaves but round, pregnant loaves or loaves moulded with a breast motif. In the folk-festive scheme Camporesi describes, however, bread was not merely imbued with a generative symbolism to counter the inevitable destruction connoted by its lack. The other essential component was laughter, which not only fended off death but transformed it into something positive. In this regard laughter arose not from some rude humour regarding the bread's carnal shape, something that today might find its origin in the repression of the sexual, but from a joyous response to the bread's function as a marker of the vital role of death in the cycle of fecundity.

It might seem difficult to conclude that, behind the symbolism, peasants were laughing at the fact that their loved ones were fertilizer, but contemporary society can have little appreciation of how real the threat of famine was for peasants of early modern Europe and how radically it transformed social custom. Laughter, Camporesi writes,

is a powerful life-giving force, a magic principle of creation and re-creation of life, an instrument of multiplication of men, animals and plants. Thus one can suppose that once there were agrarian mimic buffoons, a comic theatre of death, or at least ludic funeral rites with traditional comic and verbal forms that aimed to cancel the victory of death and laugh it to scorn, interrupting the scene of mourning with the flash of grotesque pantomime. This behaviour, from its earliest origins, was linked with the untrammelled gaiety and the excitement that spread contagiously at harvest and threshing times: exhibition of genitals and buttocks, obscene language, cakes in the form of the phallus or vulva, group copulations on the ground *en plein air* and dances like the tresca on the hulled grain.<sup>17</sup>

There are not too many steps between a festive identification of laughter with the sexual and a correspondence between laughter and animism. Fertility implies the organic, and the animate is usually organic, except in cases involving the intervention of human

artifice. This is obviously a relevant point when discussing Svankmajer as an animator—and the irony of animating the organic subject on the inorganic medium of celluloid is deliberately ambiguous—but it also pertains to his role as a storyteller. The animistic universe is also, after all, that of the fairy tale. Camporesi is certainly aware of this when he writes that

[L]aughter—as Propp has shown—together with carnal intercourse, propitiates plant life and enhances the harvest.... It excites the fruitful energy of the earth. The sun laughs, and the sun (in folktales) impregnates. And whereas death puts an end to a life and closes an existence, laughter throws everything wide open. It is a force for multiplication and reproduction, an enigmatic and impalpable fecundating power, an emanation of the great ‘laughing’ star, the generator of life...<sup>18</sup>

The folk tale finds its parallel in the real world through the folk custom, such as that of peasant women who would stand in front of the open doors of an oven while simulating defecation—an act whose signifiers are not unlike those of giving birth, he notes.

Laughter promoted the *growth* of the cakes and made them magically *rise*.

In his other work, *Bread of Dreams: Food and Fantasy in Modern Europe*, Camporesi describes another folk custom. The *carmina diabolica* is the satanic or diabolical song that peasants all over Eastern Europe—and indeed “wherever agrarian culture created as it were an ambivalent sense of life”<sup>19</sup>—would sing at the graveside of a deceased loved one. As the name suggests, the song is devilish, devilishly funny in intent, and was meant similarly to transport the mourner across the not-yet-yawning existential gap between death and life, old and new. The songs were sometimes also accompanied by a ceremonial feast in the cemetery, bringing the basic ritual that affirms life even into the tomb. In this sense, the corpse itself is a member of the feast and death no longer holds court. “Death and laughter,” writes Camporesi,

are tightly bound together in an inseparable dialectical relationship in all cultures of the agrarian type, which have the profound nucleus of their religiosity—a constant relation between and earth and sub-soil, fertility and sterility—in vegetable rebirth and reproduction by means of dead seeds.<sup>20</sup>

In the dialectical space of Svankmajer’s films, however, the alchemy of this natural process has been disrupted. The age-old dance between sex and death stumbles. In food or the feast, in the animate force of nature represented by clay or mud given motion, in the marionette player in the twisted carnival there is no fertility that offers human comfort, at least in an existential sense. The laughter is hollow or at best sardonic and accentuates the finality of death rather than transmuting it to rebirth.

### **Consumption and the culture of cannibalism**

Camporesi’s discussion of sardonic laughter in *Bread of Dreams* in the chapter on ‘Sacred and Profane Cannibalism’ is also relevant to Svankmajer’s films. Virgil wrote of “sardonic herbs” – euthanasia drugs used by certain ancient civilizations (the reference is vague) to thin out the population of the elderly in order to benefit the youth. Incidentally, *The Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that the term “sardonic” is derived from “Sardinia,” where, according to Camporesi, “rustic celery” grows. Rustic celery is also known as *Apium risum* (“laughing celery”),

since it is believed that those who eat it die laughing; several others who are more to be believed, say that when this Sardinian celery is eaten it causes all the nerves to retract in such a way as to widen and distend the mouth, and whoever has eaten it, as he dies, resembles a person laughing.<sup>21</sup>

The drugs Virgil refers to likewise were reputed to induce laughter. Camporesi’s description of this laughter alone seems to approximate in the reader the same sort of

black humour that permeates Svankmajer's films: "Dancing and laughing on the edge of the abyss while everything, amidst massacre, butchery and horror, is tumbling down around them."<sup>22</sup> It recalls Breton's assertion that laughter can stand at the lip of the void and laugh death in the face. Breton's cackle, however, is the sole escape of the absurd, not the "act of piety which transforms death into a new birth."<sup>23</sup>

This example of the old sacrificed to the sustenance of the young also relates to the prevalence of cannibalism as a motif in Svankmajer's works. *Little Otik* (2000) invokes this when the monster devours its parents, for example. In general, while Bakhtin envisioned the folk-festive as imparting a liberating sense of identity in the collective, he chose not to emphasise the role of the individual as sacrificial lamb to that greater good. In Svankmajer, however, a prevailing theme of cannibalism inverts the emphasis and illustrates the absence of any such Rabelaisian brotherhood.

The first of the three segments of *Dimensions of Dialogue*, for example, features two Arcimboldo-inspired human profiles, composed of vegetables and fruits on the one hand and kitchen utensils on the other. Arcimboldo was an early mannerist artist employed at the court of the Hapsburg Emperor Rudolf, who presided over Prague's golden age and was highly regarded by the surrealists. The heads in this short film meet, greet, and devour each other in turn, with the victor subtly changed before vomiting forth his next contender, who will devour him. The two heads—one organic, one mineral—gradually intermingle in their cannibalistic dance, but their heterogeneity eventually turns to homogeneity—both become clay through the violence of their interaction.

The reverse transubstantiation of bloodshed into feast was a popular folk-festive convention, whereas here Svankmajer's feast symbolises bloodshed. While the constant

cycle of eating and vomiting is nearly slapstick in its dimensions and the profiles clearly caricatures, the endless repetition and violence belies an absurdist, tentative humour. This also follows from the film's cultural context as a general comment on globalisation and its homogenising, culturally erosive effects. Modernity robs the piece of any underlying folk-festive subtext that promises renewal and rebirth.

Cannibalistic scenarios convey a more specific, pointed social commentary in such shorts as *Jabberwocky* (1971), another adaptation of a Lewis Carroll story. A stream of small dolls tear their way out of a larger straw doll, are then dismembered, minced in a coffee grinder, and cooked on a miniature stove. They are then casually nibbled on by a number of large dolls at a tea party. On one level the large dolls represent the dominant political establishment dining on the smaller dolls (i.e., the Czech populace) and the scenario also alludes to the hypocrisy of Czech society under the oppression of political “normalisation” in which, for instance, neighbours were encouraged to inform on neighbours.

Svankmajer's *Food* (1992) is also an excoriating take on the socio-political reality in communist Czechoslovakia. It is divided into three vignettes, the first of which, *Breakfast*, features humanoid vending machines that dispense a meagre meal only after complicated and exhausting manipulations. The final scene is of a long line of hungry people waiting patiently for their ration. The mockery of communist inefficiency is apparent—a wryly amusing take on a bleak reality. *Lunch* puts two fellow diners in a fancy restaurant at the mercy of an inattentive waiter. Famished, they begin to eat everything in sight—the cutlery, plates, tablecloth, table and—as the last scene shows—probably each other. Like the bizarre reconfiguration of vending machines in *Breakfast*,

the act of dining on the instruments of dining is a flourish of the surreal, and the figure of the waiter seems a pointed jibe at the establishment, which has the means to serve the people but which doesn't seem to bother. *Dinner* features a solitary diner, again in an upscale establishment, seasoning the unseen contents of his plate with slow relish. The viewer's curiosity increases until we see the diner's right hand, which is made of wood. To confirm one's worst fears, the diner begins to cut up and eat his own left hand. The humour is particularly black in this segment, mocking how delicate social ritual and conditioning are effective masks for brutal self-destruction.

Some of the most striking images of cannibalism occur in *Little Otik*, Svankmajer's most recent and lengthiest film. There is a scene early in the movie in which the eponymous character—a tree root resembling a baby that magically comes to life—begins crying with hunger moments after its mother, Mrs Horakova, has finished breastfeeding it. She comes to comfort her “son” by tickling his belly and as she does so her long tresses fall into Otik's face, whereupon he begins chewing on them with unimaginable voracity. Soon she is fighting for her scalp, if not her life, and is only saved when her mortified husband rushes over and severs her hair with a butcher's knife. She nervously jokes that Otik must have thought it was time for her to change her hairstyle: an alarming scenario, but a rather minor event alongside the atrocities that are to follow in this bizarre black-comedy/horror tale. Otik's appetites increase at the same pace as his size and soon he has consumed the family cat and threatens to move on to the neighbours. Meanwhile the little girl next door is onto the Horaks' horrible secret, thanks in part to her serendipitous possession of a book of fairy tales that recounts the little monster's story, clueing her in to the terrible mischief to come.

Otik is no ordinary child but the figment of its parents' imaginations made, if not flesh, then wood: the figuration of their desires pulled from the mundanity of the backyard and given a ferocious animacy. Literally dug up from the garden by Mr Horak, this root/ogre/child is like the mandrake of folk-lore, except that instead of being born from the fallen seed of a dead man, it sprouts from the black humour of a crestfallen man with dead seed—the impotent husband playing what he thinks to be a joke on his child-obsessed but childless wife. Otik eats nearly everything and everyone over the course of the film, and as such might be read as an embodiment of the primal force of hunger—Bakhtin's material bodily lower stratum. As an unearthed root, he is literally *substratum*. Like Bakhtin's devouring principle, he consumes both the common (the cat) and the symbols of authority (the social worker, who even yells "I'm an official!" to get Bozenka, Otik's "mother" to let her in).

While it bears many comparisons with his other films, *Little Otik* isn't entirely typical of Svankmajer's repertoire. The use of animation is less frequent than in any of his films and the storytelling stretches it to an overlong two hours plus. But *Little Otik*—or *Otesanek* in Czech (the translation of which connotes both "to hew" and a child that eats everything)—is very much representative of Svankmajer's oeuvre in other ways. Its story straddles both the present and the past—the events of the story transpire in the late twentieth century, as is the case with many of his films, but the story itself is much older. It is a contemporary telling of a very old tale—as is the case with *Faust*, for example. *Little Otik* also shares the thematic concerns of other Svankmajer narratives. The gothic horror that springs from Otik's murderous appetites and the black humour that

accompanies it, the surreality of the Horaks' situation, the folk and fairy tale elements from which the story itself was drawn: all are common to most if not all of his films.

The other primary theme that *Little Otik* shares with its cinematic siblings is that of food and consumption. Nearly everyone in the film is eating most of the time. The settings are usually in the home, often concerning the kitchen—and most outings involve the grocer or the butcher. Scene changes are often introduced with a close-up of a bowl of soup or of someone shoving far too much meat pie into their mouth. Another early close-up of a woman peeling potatoes, removing their “eyes,” foreshadows the arrival of Otik in that it anthropomorphises the potato, a tuber, or root vegetable. In many cases the puppet literally *is* food in Svankmajer's films, which curiously echoes the early hand puppet tradition (some early hand puppets were actually made of sausage).<sup>24</sup> And even when his puppets aren't foodstuffs themselves, they're usually eating something, particularly in *Little Otik*.

*Little Otik* also makes many references to earlier Svankmajer films, particularly *Down to the Cellar* (1983), which in many ways prefigures *Alice*, and is centred on a girl's trip to the cellar to fetch potatoes. On her trip, however, the potatoes crawl out of the basket and she encounters carnivorous shoes and a woman who bakes rolls made of dough mixed from coal dust. The elusive potato and the vicious, hungry shoe seem more the stuff of comedy than nightmares, yet the subtle treatment evokes a sense of the uncanny and raises the rather black subjects of hunger, deprivation and child abuse. In *Little Otik*, Alzbetka, the young protagonist of the story, ventures into what looks to be nearly the same cellar that the other little girl visits with trepidation in Svankmajer's earlier short. Alzbetka plays less the role of the victim, but must also beware something

hungry lurking in the basement. Otik seems to be kept in exactly the same sort of chest as the animate potatoes of the short film, and is in the same sort of locked closet as the hungry shoes. She also must evade an aged paedophile whose character is associated, strangely, with coal. The old man in *Down to the Cellar* lies in a bed of coal, and beckons the girl to join him, while the old man in *Little Otik* enters the world of the ‘real’ bringing his coal and his unnatural desires with him. There are also parallels between the menace of the old man and that of Otik: both have unnatural hungers and both should—as an old man and an “infant”—be frail, although Otik obviously defies the latter description.

Svankmajer’s first and possibly most famous feature-length film *Alice* is rife with examples of cannibalism. The White Rabbit—a taxidermied rodent come to life—consumes his own sawdust, which leaks from a wound in his animated carcass. At the Mad Hatter’s party, the Dormouse leaps from the teapot, looking more like a ravenous weasel than anything else, and voraciously consumes everything in sight. The frog footman hurls an obscenely vast tongue around the room in pursuit of a disgustingly fat fly. In one bizarre scene, snakes made from stockings eat holes through the floor like eels through a carcass.

So many of Wonderland’s curiosities are kept in jars, with Alice tempted to investigate each one. As in many Svankmajer films, the setting cannot help but evoke the *Kunstammer*, sixteenth-century emperor Rudolph of Prague’s sprawling collections, in its bewildering assortment of objects that would normally be mundane but here are imbued with mysterious import. The other association, however, is of an endless if unnerving, almost menacing pantry. Alice scoops jam from a passing jar, brings it to her mouth only to find that the jelly hides a sharp hatpin. A roll of bread she eyes suddenly

sprouts nails. Food is clearly far from wholesome in Wonderland—or in any of Svankmajer's surrealist depictions of reality.

The notion of cannibalism points most decisively to the existential rift that has fractured the concept of self in modernity—the rift of trust between individual and group. We become food; we negotiate the mouth of the other—the liminal, now satanic space where some theologians suggested that the hope for bodily resurrection would be destroyed, where the self is dissolved in the other.

Food is only eternally abundant as an ideal; as a specificity it is bound to become excrement, much as youth is only an ideal, with the individual youth doomed to eventual old age. The implication of this is that the self too is only an ideal, an illusory but necessary construct. Perhaps an extreme example such as cannibalism is necessary to reveal how deeply we ascribe to the culture of the individual (in a modern rather than strictly contemporary sense) and why yesterday's festive alchemies of fertility and laughter today give us not gold but lead.

In conclusion, food and the mouth are key elements of the grotesque and folk-festive traditions from which Svankmajer draws heavily but which he subverts to reflect the modern. The festive identification of the individual with the group was interimbricated with his or her relation to food and eating. The emblems of this identification remain, but their spiritual meanings, their original flavours, if you will, are no longer intact. Svankmajer is often described as an alchemist but in this regard he is more a chef, his cinematic recipes hardly *nouvelle cuisine* but certainly new twists on old standards.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> In an interview following a screening of *Little Otik* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> Peter Kral interview, trans. Jill McGreal (*Afterimage* 13, 1987), 23.
- <sup>3</sup> Franklin Rosemont, *Andre Breton and the First Principles of Surrealism* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), 56.
- <sup>4</sup> Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), 35.
- <sup>5</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, trans. Helene Iswolsky, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 256.
- <sup>6</sup> Andre Breton, trans. Mark Polizzotti, *Anthology of Black Humor* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1997), xiv.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> Andre Breton, *Second Surrealist Manifesto* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1972), 179.
- <sup>12</sup> Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, 291.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.
- <sup>14</sup> Piero Camporesi, trans. Joan Krakover Hall, *The Magic Harvest: Food, Folklore and Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 15.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.
- <sup>19</sup> Piero Camporesi, trans. David Gentilcore, *Bread of Dreams: Food and Fantasy in Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 43.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.
- <sup>23</sup> Breton, *op. cit.*, xiv.
- <sup>24</sup> Henryk Jurkowski, with Penny Francis as Contributing Ed., *A History of European Puppetry from Its Early Origins to the End of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 121.