**Book Review**

**The Svankmajer Archive**

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**Classifying and Recording the *Kunstkammer* Oeuvre of Czech artist, Jan Svankmajer**

*Jan Svankmajer – Dimension of Dialogue/ Between Film and Fine Art* ed. Frantisek Dryje and Bertrand Schmitt. Revnice: Arbor Vitae, 2012. 508 pages. $49.95, paperback.

In late March of 1969, the Czechoslovakia national ice hockey team beat the Soviet Union team at the World Ice Hockey Championships in Stockholm, Sweden. The event became a point of pride – a symbol of revenge – for the Czechoslovakian people against the imposed patronage of the Soviets. In 1972, Czech filmmaker and artist, Jan Svankmajer, was completing his short film, Leonardo’s Diary 72, which situates the postmodern historical moment through juxtapositions of modern technological and scientific progress with its antecedents in the works of the Renaissance, especially the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci. The film seems to posit that Foucauldian-like ‘veridiction’ is a mask of winning attributes worn by those with a loser’s mentality in a context bereft of historical markers and waypoints. Diary 72 is a sarcastic work, more so than the playful tongue-in-cheek authorial hat-tipping moments that audiences are used to with Svankmajer’s film work. Human progress is examined as having deep-seated elements of phoniness and disingenuousness – power corrupts… and changes us – but life retains its legitimate joys and rightful plenitude of opportunity. In that respect Svankmajer provides a philosophical treatment and entertainment experience that is fair and even-handed. However, the film struck a chord with the censors motivating their course of action - to ban Svankmajer from filmmaking for the better part of an entire decade. The point of interest for the censors which received their scorn and sanctioning was a juxtaposition of images through film editing - an image of a hockey player with a da Vinci drawing of a man’s head shouting (Schmitt *et. al.*, 131). The censors found the juxtaposition to be politically subversive in intent and evoking incendiary emotions in audiences to be rallied against Soviet patronage. *Dimensions of Dialogue…* traces this historical account of Svankmajer’s career as an artist – seemingly a ‘blip’ in the record given the comprehensiveness of the text for covering every possible detail of Svankmajer’s life that might relate to his artistic output. The text boasts of being the primary monograph on Jan Svankmajer and claims to remain so through the course of time. These claims seem legitimate given the extensive detail and the obvious intense research into Svankmajer’s life and work that is then laid out for the reader in a more-or-less chronological fashion.

The editors of *Dimensions of Dialogue…* posit that the text has the goal of showing the points of intersection between Svankmajer’s work as it relates to Surrealism, Mannerism, experimentation, scenography, poetry, and so on. This endeavor underscores the historiographical model of the text overall – that social/cultural, aesthetic, technological explanatory arguments forming and informing Svankmajer’s work be subsumed under the banner of the biographical. Svankmajer is elevated to an incorrigible agent of his own fate – executing new modes of expression in an environment which he moulds into a personal reflection of his experience. The text may be faulted for putting such onus on the biographical to explain Svankmajer’s work, yet it remains the consolidating mandate of the text in order to reinforce a claim of being the definitive monograph on Svankmajer’s career as an artist.

The first chapter of *Dimensions of Dialogue…* is written by Bertrand Schmitt (the primary author and editor) and is evocative of his over-zealousness for biography. Jan Svankmajer’s earliest career moments are examined – his graduation project of the three performance of *The King Stag* at the Loutka Theatre in Prague. Svankmajerian themes of transmutation and motifs of magical life find their origin in this adaptation of *Re Cervo* by Carlo Gozzi (Schmitt *et. al.*, 15). Svankmajer’s *raison d’etre* as artist is conceived as the examination of “symbiotic and conflicting relations of the Janus faces that are man and marionette” (Schmitt *et al.*, 17). In this respect, Svankmajer’s work as a puppeteer becomes a throughline for the text although the authors seem to intentionally avoid a conceptualization of Svankmajer as puppeteer, first and foremost. This might be considered too onerous and an unnecessary consideration which creates certain obstacles in marrying a historical record of ‘Svankmajer as man’ with ‘Svankmajer as artist’.

The second chapter of the text is another essay written by Schmitt, this time recording and accounting for Svankmajer’s narrative interests, especially with regard to Faustian themes. Svankmajer’s work on Emil Radok’s *Johanes Doktor Faust* aptly elucidates on the connection between the significance of Faust performances in the Czech puppet theatre with their influence in inspiring much of Svankmajer’s film work. Schmitt makes the claim, “in Svankmajer’s mind Adam, Prometheus, Faust and Don Juan are really the four faces of the same myth” (Schmitt, 51). It might be regarded that Schmitt’s examination of themes of dark alchemy may have inspired some spurious reasoning in the author as convoluted statements tend toward epic proportions arguably making much more out of something than was there to begin with (like turning lead into gold, perhaps). Svankmajer is elevated to the position of a priest on alternative living and philosophy of life generally – begging questions as to the historiographical soundness of the methodology of presentation. Schmitt seems unable to let the facts reveal their inner truths to the reader and there is a marked sense of the fashioning of details to support a broader thesis in the project overall.

The third chapter is organized very similarly to the fifth and eighth chapters – detailed biography with commentary spanning from Svankmajer’s birth to the date of publication of the text (2012). The biographical information is greatly detailed, for example, when accounting for Svankmajer’s interest in food as art object being rooted in an early childhood experience of being force-fed by nurses when he had scarlet fever (Schmitt, *et al.,* 63). Schmitt remarks that impressions of Svankmajer after this childhood experience where that he was an introvert with a morbid nature. It would seem rather grand to allow these kinds of biographical details to form the backbone for an understanding of Svankmajer when it might be suggested that his experience was quite common for growing up as a child during the inter-war period in central Europe. The three chapters on biographical notes are effective in tracing Svankmajer’s activities as an artist – from his interest in the writings of the Devetsil authors to his leadership initiatives in the Czech Surrealist Group with tactile experimental games (The Restorer) to the organization of exhibits around the Czech Republic in the early 2000s. One would be remiss in not providing certain accolades to the authors of *Dimensions of Dialogue…* for the in-depth research and extensive recording of detail – even the relatively mundane. These chapters, like the rest of the text, feature hundreds of images from drawings to movie stills to art pieces and personal photographs. It would be difficult to claim that anything significant has been left out and the text stands as an archive of its own – a *Kunstkammer* of historical facts and artefacts – of all things Svankmajer.

The fourth chapter traces Svankmajer’s influences from the visual art world – especially that of Paul Klee who linked humanity and nature into a transparent play in the dynamism of forms (Schmitt, 99). Svankmajer’s Mannerist roots are examined as the authors posit that his personal style as an artist formed around his sculptural work and his visual art (paintings and drawings). The ‘maieutics’ of objects developed in Svankmajer’s work situates the convergence of his Mannerist cataloguing with the foregrounding of hidden truths that define his Surrealist tendencies. The text claims that to understand Svankmajer’s work is to also understand that his objects have an internal life more important than their utilitarian function.

Chapter six and seven have different authors (not Schmitt) – Ivo Purs and Franktisek Dryje, respectively. Purs suggests that Svankmajer’s Surrealist tendencies were a vector for a greater interest in Mannerism and the *Kunstkammer* (cabinet of curiosity) from the era of Holy Roman German Emperor and ruler of Bohemia, Rudolf II. Surrealism is posited as the necessary vector for translating the sensitivities of Renaissance-era Mannerism into the modern context. Svankmajer has been quoted as having claimed to be a Surrealist by circumstantial necessity (Schmitt, 141) – Dryje examines the connection between Svankmajer and Surrealism through marking points of departure from Mannerism in Svankmajer’s work. Dryje suggests that Svankmajer used Mannerism as a ‘foundation’ for his art but that Surrealism was necessary for ‘shifts’ or transitions - for re-contextualizing the same thoughts and ideas into ever-changing historical moments. One is quickly reminded of how tumultuous Svankmajer’s historical moments were as he lived through inter-war Europe, WWII central Europe, behind the Soviet Iron Curtain, national revolutions and revolts, and finally into an era of entrepreneurial, laissez-faire gangsterism. The ‘revolution’ of Svankmajer’s historical context is well formulated in the essays of Purs and Dryje as they seek to trace how history, art and aesthetics converge and diverge to form the oeuvre of one of the world’s most unique artists.

The final chapter is a short anthology of the writings of Jan Svankmajer which includes short essays, manifestos, poems, letters and some notes on his feature-length films. The most interesting piece is perhaps a short essay entitled, *On the Authenticity of Art*, where Svankmajer suggests that authentic works of art are those that come closest to the work of nature and that each conscious intervention by humans threatens the authenticity of the work. Svankmajer claims that the most authentic works of art are automatic texts, such as cave drawings. This piece is revealing as Svankmajer comments that his intention as an artist is to ‘fossilize’ artefacts of civilization. In this respect there is a great tension between Svankmajer’s engineering artistic efforts as totally inauthentic with his production of artistic artefacts which have the quality of being authentic fossils of civilization. This concept underscores what emerges from either perusing or through an in-depth reading of *Dimensions of Dialogue…* - Svankmajer is an enigma where dichotomy becomes a factor of consolidation. In this respect, compiling all things Svankmajer into one massive text seems rather *apropos* as the contradictions in Svankmajer’s work provide for necessary insights into the meaning of the work and the making of the man.