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The Object of Film in Jan Švankmajer

The Czech surrealist filmmaker's latest film, *Lunacy* (*Šilení*, 2005), is described as a “philosophical horror” that takes as its themes “absolute freedom, the repression of civilisation and manipulation” (Švankmajer, “*Lunacy*” 1). In this article I wish to consider the ways in which this film and Švankmajer's earlier feature *Conspirators of Pleasure* (*Spiklenci slasti*, 1996) deal with the problem of “absolute freedom.” I will do this with reference to Roland Barthes' *Sade – Fourier – Loyola*. I also examine more carefully the self-reflexivity of the films and the status of objects represented in the films, as well as the idea of the films themselves as objects.

Švankmajer describes *Lunacy* as an “infantile tribute” to Edgar Allan Poe and the Marquis de Sade. Of course, these two figures have featured prominently in his previous films: *Conspirators of Pleasure* alludes to Sade explicitly by featuring illustrations from several of his publications during the credit sequence. Švankmajer has also created short-film versions of Poe's “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) as *Zánik domů Usherů* (1980) and “The Pit and the Pendulum” (1842) as *The Pendulum, the Pit and Hope* (*Kyvadlo, jáma a náději*, 1983). This last film is an amalgamation of Poe's story and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's “The Torture by Hope” (English trans. 1891).

Fig. 1: The Point-of-View Shot: Berlot Offers His Hand to the Marguis

Lunacy's protagonist, Jean Berlot (played by Pavel Liška), is offered a lift by the Marquis (Jan Tříska) as Jean is returning home from his mother's funeral. The Marquis takes him to his own manor where Jean witnesses a satanic orgy and the subsequent death—or so he thinks—of the Marquis. The Marquis, however, appears to have been playing a joke on Jean (or indulging, as he claims, in some autotherapy, or both). This part of the film is based in part on Poe's “The Premature Burial” (1850). The Marquis goes on to suggest that Jean

should come with him to the local insane asylum in order to work through Jean's own feelings about his mother's recent death in just such an asylum. The next part of the film takes much of its imagery and inspiration from Poe's "The System of Doctor Tarr and Mr. Fether" (1850). At the asylum Jean meets Dr Murloppe (Jaroslav Dušek), who collects false moustaches and beards in glass cabinets like butterflies, and his daughter, Charlotte (Anna Geislerová), both of whom had taken part, she seemingly unwillingly, in the previous night's orgy. Jean decides to become a patient in the hospital in order to help Charlotte, who explains that Murloppe and the Marquis are dangerous madmen who have incarcerated the real personnel of the asylum in the cellars below. The Marquis, however, warns Jean that it is in fact Charlotte who is mad, "a nymphomaniac and a hysteric" and cannot be trusted. Jean helps free the tarred and feathered prisoners, including Coulmiere (Martin Huba) the supposed former head of the institute, but it is Jean himself who is then deemed to be insane and his course of treatment begins as the film ends.

The film is punctuated throughout with non-diegetic animated vignettes, which mainly feature slabs of meat and various body parts moving from one place to another (sometimes to re-populate empty skeletons or to become part of a wall's structure). These short episodes often seem to act as a chorus comment on the action that is taking place in the "real story." I will return to this later on.

Fig. 2: Švankmajer Prepares the Stage (Production Still) **Fig. 3:** The Meat Puppet Theater

Here I will consider the beginning of the film as this will bring up many of the issues that are central to my reading of it. *Lunacy* begins with a prologue in which Švankmajer, dressed in a shapeless jumper and blue, open-necked shirt, appears in front of a white backdrop and gives this introduction:

Ladies and Gentlemen, the film you are about to see is a horror film, a horror with all the degeneracy that belongs to this genre. It is not a work of art.

Today, art is all but dead anyway, in its place is a sort of reflecting advertisement for the face of Narcissus. Our film can be considered to be an infantile tribute to Edgar Allan

Poe from whom I have borrowed a number of motifs; and to the Marquis de Sade to whom the film owes its blasphemy and its subversiveness.

At this point, hearing some odd sounds, Švankmajer looks down and we see a pixilated tongue moving noisily across a wooden floor in the manner of a caterpillar. It is as if Švankmajer's own words are trying to escape from him just as he is trying to pin down possible interpretations of his film.¹ Unperturbed, he looks back up and continues:

The subject of the film is essentially an ideological debate about how to run a lunatic asylum. Basically there are two ways of managing such an institution, each equally extreme. One encourages absolute freedom, the other the old-fashioned, well-tryed method of control and punishment. But there is also a third one that combines and exacerbates the very worst aspects of the other two. And that is the madhouse we live in today. (translation modified)

What exactly is this worst of both worlds? Absolute freedom leads towards anarchy and chaos while complete control results in totalitarian silence. Both "ideologies" suffer from the same paradox that Švankmajer describes thus: "It is however impossible for an individual to have absolute freedom in practice without restricting and manipulating the freedom of others" (quoted Kříž and Křípač 5-6). It is this paradox of freedom that both *Lunacy* and *Conspirators of Pleasure* explore.

Fig. 4: The Cards of the Game of Life

After Švankmajer's introduction, a pig's carcass is disemboweled and the credits appear over thirteen cards arranged in tarot-fashion, which flip themselves over to reveal a series of illustrations by Eva Švankmajerová. Each card depicts some form of torture or

disfigurement: a tongue studded with nails, an ear cut off with scissors, a castration with pliers, a nose cut off with a knife, teeth knocked out by a hammer. These cards appear later in the film when the Marquis' assistant, Dominic (played by Švankmajer stalwart, Pavel Nový), plays a board game in which the cards function as bonuses or penalties. The film about this film, *The Making of Lunacy* (*Film o filmu*; dir. Jan Daňhel, 2005) reveals that the person who dies first is the winner of the game. It is the black humor of this motif that speaks to the paradox of freedom: ultimate freedom—the winning of the game of life—results in death.

A knock on the door wakes Jean, who is clearly terrified. His shirt slips off a chair and slowly drags itself over to the door, which it opens. Two big, bald men in white coats enter holding a straitjacket up before them. As Jean tries to fight them off—in this sequence and throughout the film—Švankmajer uses direct point-of-view reverse shots to stress the subjectivity of the experience. This cutting technique, it must be added, also gives the film a rather amateurish appearance because it directly contradicts accepted reverse-shot editing conventions, in which straight-on point-of-view is very rarely used. This clumsiness must, however, be read as part of the project of anti-illusion that strongly informs Švankmajer's work. Similarly, the animation of the shirt and of the meat in the rest of the film is hardly smooth and actively works to foreground its status as animation.

We move away from Jean's subjectivity to the commotion outside his room as the other inn-dwellers gather to find out the cause of the ruckus. The innkeeper orders the door to be broken down and Jean is discovered alone, hysterical, and on fire. The Marquis pushes forward and slowly approaches Jean. He shouts, "Wake up!" and slaps Jean's bespittled face twice (Švankmajer again uses a point-of-view reverse shot sequence here). Jean subsides amidst the wreckage of his room. Jean encounters these white-coated men three more times in the film and on each occasion, except for the last, he is slapped awake just before the men

capture him. In the finale, however, when Coulmiere wakes him from his delusional dream, Jean's nightmare comes true as the director invites the two white-coats, now in the real world, to take Jean away.

After Jean's first violent episode, there follows the first of the many animated meat sequences, in which steaks slice off a huge piece of beef and crawl down a table-leg and across a dusty concrete floor. As is usual, Švankmajer stresses the visceral texture of both the meat and the surfaces of the environment. Put together, the meat sequences in the film appear to trace a vague narrative of reconstitution as various body parts converge on an underground cellar—perhaps in the Marquis' manor—where they re-inhabit a number of animal skulls and skeletons. This trajectory mirrors Jean's own journey from the inn towards his final incarceration in the asylum.

The next morning Jean enters the restaurant and it is peopled entirely by the cast that will appear later in the film (Murloppe, Charlotte, the madmen of the asylum—but not the incarcerated prisoners), and they then fight to get on a bus—just as if they were a crew of actors being bussed off to location (which, of course, they are). It is possible to explain this away with a paranoid logic: everything has been set up in order to deceive and trick Jean. It is, however, difficult to understand why anyone would go to this trouble, especially since Jean is not particularly engaging, endearing, or bright. It is also possible, on a deeper paranoid level, to imagine that everything we see in the film is a hallucination—probably Jean's. However, the simplest explanation is that *Lunacy* refuses any unambiguous explanation and that it is neither possible to tell exactly what is happening, nor why it is taking place.

The prologue to the film is essential (although Švankmajer himself disingenuously says in an interview that the reason it is there is “because I cannot personally be at every screening of my film” (“Protože nemohu být u každého promítání svého filmu přítomen osobně”). Such a prologue may remind us of Orson Welles’ commentary in *F for Fake* (1975) or the introductions that Alfred Hitchcock filmed as advertisements for some of his films—most notably, *Psycho* (1960)—and Švankmajer is certainly hamming it up with his tongue firmly in his cheek (if you’ll excuse the dreadful pun). But the abrupt movements of the camera at the beginning and end of the prologue—shunting Švankmajer on-stage in the manner of a rather clunky *deus ex machina*—and the audible whirring of the camera projector foreground the status of the film as an artificial medium based on cheap tricks and illusions (and, of course, his stop-motion animation style is almost perversely crude). Thus, the image itself (or the film itself, if you will) from the very beginning insists on its own existence as base illusion, as something that we should not trust. In his thorough, if now rather dated, study of reflexivity in film and literature, Robert Stam writes that “reflexive fictions defiantly call attention to their own artifice and operations, refusing a transparent self-effacing language that opens quietly onto the world” (129) and *Lunacy* clearly resists this transparency both explicitly—as in this prologue—and implicitly through the anti-realism (or, some might say, anti-classicism) of its formal and narrative style.

The theme of illusion is constant throughout the film and Jean is often warned not to trust surface appearances. It is never possible to decide who anybody is in the film or where they might fit into the narration.² When Jaroslav Dušek was asked about his character, Dr Murloppé, in an interview, he replied:

He is a slightly mad psychiatrist, or maybe a madman who sees himself as a psychiatrist, perhaps he was once a good psychiatrist who slowly became more and more mad, or maybe he was clearly insane from the beginning, and

others consider him to be a psychiatrist by mistake... I myself don't know.

(Czech

Television interview;

<http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/specialy/sileni/jaroslavdusek.php>; my trans.)

The uncertain status of identities and events is a theme that recurs in many of Švankmajer's films. What at first appears to be the result of some mysterious, alchemical magic is quickly revealed to be the result of a cheap trick. In *Faust (Lekce Faust, 1994)*, for instance, the main character sits down in a bar and is handed a corkscrew with which he bores a hole in the table and, miraculously, wine pours forth. When Faust leaves, the other patrons understandably flock to the magical wine table only to be disappointed when the waiter turns off the tap that feeds the wine through a rubber pipe. This exposing of trickery as part of the alchemical search for knowledge is perhaps most powerfully presented in Alejandro Jodorowsky's *The Holy Mountain (1973)*, which tells the story of a group of acolytes seeking the ultimate answer. After many tribulations, the seekers finally ascend a mountain and sit down with someone they believe to be the ultimate master and the bearer of the secret. This person is revealed to be Jodorowsky himself and, laughing, he proclaims: "Zoom out camera" and declares that this is all merely a film and that the true secret cannot be found here in the land of illusion but only in the real place of the seeker. Švankmajer's own good-natured exposure of the artifice of cinema (and of narrative) seems to work in a similar manner: the truth you seek is not here. In a section entitled "Illusion and Anti-illusion," František Drye writes of Švankmajer:

This moment of conflict between two fields—artificial and real, fictional and real—in one blow concretizes the universal sense of their dependence and the whole work moves into the realm of real-unreal metamorphosis. (Švankmajer and Drye 14)

The Classes of Objects: Hidden Identities

I have briefly mentioned the importance of texture in Švankmajer's work and there has been much commentary, both by himself and others, on the ways in which objects function in his films.³ Using *Lunacy* as an example I wish to give a more careful typology of the objects that appear in Švankmajer's films.

1. Objects that exist as markers of time/place: the carriage/the bus/the clothes
2. Objects that appear to have a special, historical significance: Jean's mother's comb (to which he clings obsessively, but of which at least two other people, including the Marquis, have almost exact copies)
3. Objects that are animated by stop-motion: the shirt/the meat
4. Objects that are alive: humans/animals
5. Aural (acousmatic) objects: objects that only exist by virtue of the soundtrack: most noticeably in this film, the song of birds (but much more needs to be said about this elsewhere)
6. The film itself as object (the whirring in the prologue highlights this)

What all these objects have in common is that they imply the existence of a hidden meaning; one that we suppose comes from the great puppeteer. It is here that I think we find in Švankmajer a peculiarly endearing form of anti-humanism, since he often seems to argue that humans are nothing more than meat-puppets without a puppeteer (or at least not one with whom they could ever have any meaningful contact). This is a theme that also occurs throughout his films, from the very first one, *The Last Trick of Mr. Schwarzwald and Mr. Edgar* (*Poslední trik pana Schwarzewaldea a pana Edgara*, 1964), in which two life-size marionettes indulge in aggressive play, through *Punch and Judy* (*Rakvičkárna*, 1966), in which a hand-puppet Punch and Clown battle over the possession of a real-life guinea-pig to

Alice (*Něco z Alenky*, 1987), where Alice herself turns into a number of different animated dolls. Švankmajer refers to actors as “puppet-actors” (*herec-loutka*) and places them at the same level of importance as all other props (Kříž and Křipač 6). One of the purposes of the animated meat sequences is to stress the fact that all objects are equally alive—or falsely animated (this is graphically portrayed in one sequence where the mortar between stones is replaced by breathing meat).

Fig. 5: The Blasphemous Orgy Paradoxical Freedom **Fig. 6:** The Tableaux of Liberty (Ana Geislerová):
Fig. 7: *La Liberté Guidant le peuple*, Eugène Delacroix (1830)

The fakeness—or reality—of being alive is developed most clearly in the meat-puppet sequence in *Lunacy*. Berlot has just watched the Marquis, Dominic, Dr. Murloppe, Charlotte, and a few others indulge in a blasphemous, Sadian orgy which ends in a posed stance where all the actors freeze in position. Then we cut to a close-up of the fetish-Christ, embedded with nails, and slabs of meat begin to burst out of the statue. They fall to the floor and make their way up a ladder onto a small puppet-stage. On stage the steaks are controlled by bits of string tied to various parts of the meat (whereas their movement had been pixilated before) and, to a background cacophony of carnival music, bird chirps, and squeaking machinery, the meat-puppets prance around as various backdrops change behind them. Finally, some stylized waves move onto the stage and the puppets unconvincingly “drown.” As they drift down, they are followed by their control hand-grips, seemingly implying that there is no puppeteer above them. This is an effect—the puppeteer-less puppet—that Švankmajer explores most fully in his *Don Juan* (*Don Šayn*, 1970) and *Faust*. If we take this scene to be emblematic of the film as a whole, then we might say that we are born from false gods, take part in a play whose script we do not understand, and finally we die with no indication as to who may have been in charge of it all.

In fact, today, there is no language site outside bourgeois ideology: our language comes from it, returns to it, remains closed up in it. The only possible rejoinder is neither confrontation nor destruction, but only theft: fragment the old text of culture, science, literature, and change its features according to formulae of disguise, as one disguises stolen goods.

(Barthes 10)

In his *Sade – Fourier – Loyola*, Roland Barthes argues that these three utopian writers offer a model for freedom that is based on the materiality of their writing and not on the purported content of their ideas. Leaving aside his discussion of Loyola, I wish briefly to explore what it is that Barthes finds appealing in the work of Sade and Fourier, and to relate this to the films of Švankmajer.

Sade, Barthes argues, is fundamentally interested in an accountancy of pleasure. If pleasure can be measured by the number of orifices sexually entered and by the number of societal taboos broken, then it is possible to do so statistically in an ordered manner. In the Sadian orgy every sexual act can be performed by (or on) any participant without regard for its supposed activity or passivity (thus, one may just as easily be the sodomiser as the sodomised). But because “everyone can be... agent and patient, subject and object, since pleasure is possible anywhere, with victims as well as masters, we must look elsewhere for the rationale behind the Sadian grouping” (30-31). Barthes goes on to argue that the mark of distinction (of true pleasure and of power) for Sade is speech, which is “the sole caste privilege which cannot be curtailed” (31). Thus, power resides in the narrating of heinous acts rather than in their performance. He writes:

Speech is wholly bound together with the overt mark of the libertine, which is (in Sade's vocabulary) the *imagination*: it might also be said that *imagination* is the Sadian word for *language*. (31; emphasis in original)

Of course, "imagination" is the key concept for Švankmajer and he often uses the term as the ultimate tool for the achievement of freedom (not least in the title of his book *The Force of Imagination*). It is also clear that Švankmajer shares with Sade an intense interest in taxonomy and the possibilities of combination that any system of order offers—most obviously in *Et Cetera* (1966), *Historia naturae (suita)* (1967), and in the third section of *Dimensions of Dialogue (Možnosti dialogu)*, 1982). Yet it is not in the mechanical reproduction of all possibilities that Švankmajer finds freedom, but in the imaginative expression (or, to use a Barthesian term, enunciation) of those possibilities. Thus, for Sade and Švankmajer, it is not that their works propose a programme for freedom, but rather that the works in themselves are an expression of that freedom.

To return to the quotation at the beginning of this section: since language is caught up in "bourgeois ideology," it is only by using that language imaginatively (and here I will not try to define too carefully what this word might mean) that one is able to steal a contingent space for freedom. It is, I think, the contingency of this expression that disallows any sense of a straightforward political ideology that might easily move beyond the confines of the bourgeois.

At this point it would be useful to discuss the utopian thought of Charles Fourier (1772-1837) in more detail, but in the interests of space, I would like merely to point out that the problem with Fourier's utopianism is exactly the problem that Švankmajer alludes to when he says that absolute freedom cannot be practiced without impinging on the freedom of the other. Fourier imagined a society in which the fundamental structuring principle was the pleasure—or desire—of each and every citizen (Barthes 77-85). The implications for a

society that attempts to base itself on absolute freedom in this sense is explored with verve in A. S. Byatt's novel, *Babel Tower*. She juxtaposes an account of the utopia envisioned by the 1960s counter-culture in London with a fairytale-like kingdom where the king has abdicated power and encouraged his subjects to live absolutely as they feel: "The Community must strive towards complete freedom for each and every member to live and express himself—or herself—to the utmost" (63). This latter utopia is explicitly based on Fourier and throws up three major problems: the first, is what to do with excrement (a solution is never really found for this although the suggestion is made that perhaps young children should be in charge of sewerage as they seem quite fascinated by it [205]); the second problem consists of those who prefer not to be part of group activities (such as play or sex—that is, those who are not interested in "expressing themselves"); the third is the problem of desiring to hurt others (we could call this the Sadian problem). The new social system gradually descends into chaos and is, at the end of the novel, obliterated by a barbaric people called the Krebs. Three members survive—the three who were both entirely skeptical about the project and also absolutely loyal to the king. The novel's final lines are:

So the three old men began to walk away across the valley, looking back from time to time at the Tower, and the grim mound at its foot.... And they went on walking, and if the Krebs did not catch up with them, they are walking still.
(617)

In many ways, this final, rather bleak view of the utopian project mirrors the pessimism of Švankmajer, but also highlights a certain continuity and the possibility of a future that is echoed in Švankmajer's film.

Of all Švankmajer's films, *Conspirators of Pleasure* (1996) is the most overtly concerned with sexual fetishism and with desire. The film follows the lives of six characters who are variously connected (one couple is married, two live opposite each other, one delivers the post to one of these, and the last sells magazines in the same area (see Felperin for a full summary)). Each of these characters constructs some sort of prosthetic device through which to gain sexual pleasure (straw effigies, Max Ernst-inspired costumes, rolling pins hammered with nails and covered in feathers, rolled-up balls of bread to be inhaled through the nose, a tub of carp, a crudely technological masturbation machine), and much of the film charts the way in which each character finally completes the machine of his or her own particular desire and achieves climax. Švankmajer writes:

The characters in the film are clearly dominated by the pleasure principle. The “harmless” imaginative perversions of individuals are confronted with the monstrous perversions of civilization, such as politics, war, peace conferences, ethnic cleansing, accidents and plagues. What in the individual leads to a freeing of desire (at least temporarily), leads in civilization as a whole (in other words, when it is collectivized) to slavery and mass killings.

(Švankmajer, “Coming Attractions” 18)

Thus while he celebrates the autonomous pleasures that these individuals seek, which are seen to be in some way subversive of mass culture—“From the point of view of these masses and their manipulators, each attempt at a free, imaginative act of desire (pleasure) has to be a manifestation of perversity” (Švankmajer, “Coming Attractions” 18)—he argues that if this strategy was adopted as a political solution it would be immediately transformed into its opposite. When, in an interview, Jonathan Romney makes the comment: “I’m interested in this idea that Sade represents absolute freedom, because one of the most important things

about Sade is that the logic is that, if I decide to be absolutely free, then that always involves the oppression of the other whose will is not as strong,” Švankmajer answers: “That is the tragic contradiction of absolute freedom. Because it is impossible to fulfill” (Romney 59). A freedom for the individual can never be, in this analysis, a freedom for all because one can never be certain that everyone will desire the same thing. It is in the aggressive marketing of what a political system imagines to be common pleasure that Švankmajer sees an implicit totalitarianism.

Fig. 8: Configuration of Desire: The Beginning of *Conspirators* **Fig. 9:** Reconfiguration of Desire: The End of *Conspirators*

Švankmajer, in *Conspirators of Pleasure*,⁴ shows six people whose pleasures are taken outside of the system of desire provided for them by capitalism (pornographic magazines are used to make papier-mâché masks, radio electronics altered to create a televisual masturbator, latex finger protectors become tactile exciters), but the ending of the film makes clear that they themselves are functioning within a similar system of exchange. Mr Pivoňka (Petr Meissel), the straw figure fetishist, becomes mesmerised by the newscaster (Anna Wetlinská) who had been the newsagent, Kula's (Jirí Lábus), object of fascination. The postwoman (Barbora Hrzánová) is seen peering intently at a tank full of carp, while the newsagent himself is busy gluing feathers onto rolling pins. Their little perversions, however, have not been exchanged unchanged. Kula uses the feathers and chicken blood that Pivoňka had used to fashion his LopLop mask ritual in conjunction with the rolling pin, creating some unimagined third excitement. Pivoňka arrives home to find his neighbor, Mrs. Loubalová (Gabriela Wilhelmová), being carried out of their apartment block, apparently killed in his own fantasised murder of her effigy. As Pivoňka looks into Loubalová's flat, he notices the police officer, Wetlinski (Pavel Nový), fondling the coat that Loubalová had used in her own erotic scenario. Wetlinski gives Pivoňka a meaningful look as he strokes a black cat and Pivoňka stares at the policeman's umbrella (an object that had played a part in

Pivoňka's exercises).⁵ In his own flat, Pivoňka discovers candles and the tub of water used by Loubalová to drown her effigy of him (although there is no way that Pivoňka could know this). In an imitation of Loubalová's sadistic scene, Pivoňka begins slowly to undress and closes his eyes in anticipation. The camera shows us the candles reflecting in the tub before panning right to catch the cupboard doors slowly creaking open. The screen fades to black.

What at first had been a conspiracy of pleasure has now become a conspiracy of fear and death. However, the point is not so much that these individuals' relationship to objects has provided them in some odd way with a sort of pleasure, but rather that the film itself fulfills this purpose for its audience. Its presentation of impossible situations and ill-understood events makes it the "odd object" that the connoisseur of cinema seeks out in order to satisfy a barely understood desire. In doing so the filmgoer both finds freedom and gives it up. He or she desires to desire purely, but to desire at all means to desire impurely.

Fig. 10: *Conspirators of Pleasure* **Fig. 11 and Fig. 12:** Sadian Illustrations of the Ridiculous Mechanics of Desire

Conclusion

Perhaps, then, Švankmajer's final argument might be for a freedom that Justin Cartwright, paraphrasing Isaiah Berlin, describes as "the freedom to conduct our own lives in our own way with as little interference as possible"

(<http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,6109,1548166,00.html>). In *Conspirators of Pleasure* this is presented as a real possibility, even though the force of desire (the thing in the cupboard) is fundamentally destructive—that the rule is more of thanatos than of eros (or that the one demands the other). In *Lunacy* the idea that freedom is possible is ridiculed—perhaps this might be said to be the ultimate blasphemy in today's bourgeois world of supposed infinite choice—and puts forward the argument that we are all in the grip of a power that we cannot understand, but that seems to be ultimately malign.

An argument for hope still emerges, however, through the very existence of the two films. The final scene of *Lunacy*, after Jean has been taken away into the depths of the asylum, takes place at a contemporary supermarket meat-counter. The camera tracks down row upon row of packed meat and then cuts to a close-up of a steak in a polystyrene dish covered in cellophane. The meat breathes in and out. No matter how many treatments we may undergo to strip our mind from our body, this distinction, Švankmajer argues, can never be enforced. The spirit is ultimately not detachable from its meat. We may be meat-puppets, but we seem to be alive and at least we can put on a good show.

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¹ “Since reflexive texts inscribe the reader/spectator within their own rhetorical space, they often perform their own hermeneutics, counseling the audience on certain pitfalls of reading or interpretation. The interest shifts from ‘meaning’ to the productive interaction of reader and text” (Stam 153). In a recent interview, Švankmajer states: “I allow the finished work a free life and I don’t interfere with it. Besides, in an imaginative film ... the completed work is only a springboard for the viewer’s active interpretation. So the definite and final form of the film appears only in the mind of the viewer, where it should unleash a continuing creative process; interpretation as creative process” (Kříž and Křípač 5; my trans.).

² Volker Ferenz writes that in “unreliable narration... readers sense a discrepancy between the character narrator’s version of the story events and the events as they ‘truly’ are or have been. This discrepancy is consequently ascribed to the character-narrator who is then described or judged as unreliable. Unreliable narration is therefore a case of dramatic irony” (134). In *Lunacy*, however, we are given no clear “character-narrator” and we have no reliable access to the “true” story events. Švankmajer insists on the absolutely fictional nature of the narrative.

³ Perhaps most notably in *Cardinal*. Švankmajer says in a recent interview: “I like to work with objects that people have touched and on which they have left the imprint of their emotions, for I believe, along with the old hermetics, that these imprinted emotions charge the matter of the object which then under certain circumstances—for instance in the case of sensitive animation—are able to reappear” (quoted Kříž and Křípač 6).

⁴ Švankmajer explains some of his references: “With Sade and Freud it’s evident. Buñuel is in because I feel analogies with his film, *The Phantom of Liberty* (*Le Fantôme de la liberté*, 1976). In the case of Max Ernst, the bat with the bird’s head is Loplop, who appears in a number of his pictures and collages. Then there is the Czech surrealist Bohuslav Brouk, who was a controversial theorist of psychoanalysis and philosopher in the thirties. He was a member of the surrealist group between the two wars and he published a number of books, that’s why I give him a credit in this film, because he wrote *Autosexuality and Eroticism*, which was published in the surrealist edition” (quoted Romney 56).

⁵ As well as allowing Švankmajer the opportunity to present the literal meeting of umbrella and sewing machine on a dissecting table (Lautréamont 193).