

Dialectics in the films of Jan Švankmajer

Vitor Guimarães^a

^a Student at the Educational Center of Philosophy and Theology, Mackenzie Presbyterian University, Campinas - São Paulo, Brazil.

Abstract. Jan Švankmajer is a Czech filmmaker known for his use of a variety of different art methods used in his films. From stop-motion to collage, his creative mind is capable of investigating the depths of our humanity and create landscapes that can be as beautiful as terrifying. Perhaps best known for his short films, this work seeks to investigate the dialectics present in his movies and how some of his films emulate different sorts of clashes between a wide variety of objects that he can put on film to explore the human nature. Using concepts and the work of philosophers, as well as the films from Jan Švankmajer, this work seeks to understand the use of dialectics in some of the director's short films such as "The Last Trick" (1964), "Dimensions of dialogue" (1983), "Meat love" (1989) and "Darkness, light, darkness" (1989). Based on the concept of dialectics in greek philosophy, this works seeks to show a philosophical point of view of the works of Jan Švankmajer by diving deep into exploring the meanings of his symbols, constructions and stories with such an original and particular approach. Without the pretension to deplete the theme, this work is an attempt to dive deep into the meanings behind Švankmajer's work.

Keywords. Philosophy, cinema, short films, Czech cinema, Greek Philosophy

1. Introduction



Fig. 1: Jan Švankmajer photographed by Marcel Wogram for The New York Times.

Jan Švankmajer is a Czech filmmaker born on the 4th of September in the year 1934 in Prague, then part of Czechoslovakia. Studying at the School of Applied Arts, in Prague, he then enrolled in the department of puppetry at the Academy of Performing Arts [1].

Švankmajer's movies are praised for its technical merits as well as the surrealistic imagery he is able to bring to the screen, creating scenarios where the meanings multiply themselves scene after scene, with a very unique philosophical approach. This work seems to shine a light on some of his short films investigating the dialectics exposed in them, using concepts of Plato and Aristotle in parallel with the works of Jan Švankmajer.

2. The movies

2.1 The Last Trick (1964)

On 1964 he began his filmmaking career with the short movie "The Last Trick". There, we can see two illusionists, side by side, starting to compete with tricks each time more intricate leading to a violent end.

According to philosopher Eugene T. Gendlin, "Dialectic is the name Plato gives to his method, to the highest form of thought. In dialectic one examines one's assumptions, one's basic concepts, and one arrives at better assumptions and concepts" [2]. Well, isn't this competition between the magicians a sort of dialectical representation?



Fig. 2: Jan Švankmajer's "The Last Trick" (1964).

Action and reaction, at this competition between the illusionists, work as a dialogue that emerges between one trick and another, shown by someone that dominates amazingly well the craft of filmmaking. This dexterity is even more impressive when we notice that this is his first film. The creativity of the symbols brought to the film is solely surpassed by the skillness shown in editing.

With an apparently simple premise, the rhythm of this short film is truly astonishing. But, as a way to subvert the dialectical approach of one magician creating a better trick than the other time after time, they do not arrive at a greater conclusion (or even a greater trick made together). Instead, they submit into violence.

Here, we can interpret this as losing reason. We can see this fight between the two magicians as the intellect losing ground to more primitive instincts that can only produce destruction. The absence of creativity, the loss of the dialectical process is shown in this violent ending.

2.2 Dimmensions of Dialogue (1983)

At the first part of his film "Dimmensions of Dialogue", we watch a variety of objects mimicking a human form devour each other and expelling a mixture each time more reduced in its parts until they reach a human form made of clay.

In Aristotle, the concept of dialectics, or a dialectical dispute *per se* comprises a couple of contenders that, in this dispute, argument over a topic[3]. Well, without taking the risk to infer what the topic would be in this first part of Švankmajer's "Dimensions of Dialogue", the dispute is quite clear in this act of devouring and *redevouring* each other.



Fig. 3: Jan Švankmajer's "Dimensions of Dialogue" (1983)

With a superb domain over the stop motion craft, Švankmajer is, consciously or unconsciously, putting the dialectical method at proof, at least at some degree. And, as we get familiar to the filmmaker's work, if he did it unconsciously it would be even more impressive, due to his interest in the human nature and the works of the subconscious.

The head made of tools marches like an army, being defeated by the one made of, among other things, books and paint. Well, we can understand here, the tools establishing domain over nature, and after the technique and creativity being more powerful than the tools themselves. But in sequence, devoured by nature, that first head after being expelled. The devouring goes on, until we have two man-figures made of clay that keeps expelling identical figures forward.

Moving to the third and final part of this movie, we see two heads facing each other. At the first moment, when one of them opens the mouth with, for example, a pencil, the other opens the mouth with a pencil sharpener. One with a shoe, one with a shoes lace. In the second part, the objects are mixed, a pencil sharpener meets a knife and a tooth paste meets a shoe, for example, as we can see both faces crumbling. But at the end, when both of them open their mouth with equal objects, they end up destroying each other.



Fig. 4: Jan Švankmajer's "Dimensions of Dialogue" (1983)

The dialectical process needs difference to establish itself and this is clear in the last part of this movie. As they are cooperating, the process can flow, the dialogue can flow. Once one object starts to destroy the other, the faces start to deteriorate. And, finally, when they present equal objects, they end up collapsing.

We have to, once again, praise Švankmajer's ability to transform intricate themes and hide such profound meanings behind his craft. When we surpass the astonishing technical competence of the movies, a world opens itself to us. The philosophical approach of his films is capable of providing a myriad of questions aligned one after another, without the pretension of giving away any simple answer.

2.3 Meat love

Moving to the brief "Meat Love" from 1989, after being cut from a large piece of meat, two pieces of meat gain life. After turning on the radio, they dance with other and end up being thrown into a pan to be fried.

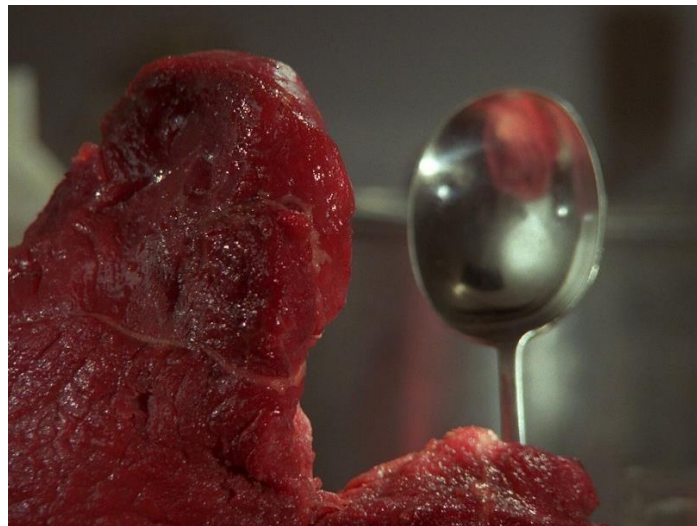


Fig. 5: Jan Švankmajer's "Meat love" (1989)

Less a dialectical approach in the meaning of pursuing knowledge, but more of a second example of the destructive way a lack of empathy acts, this has a connection to the final part of the third part of the movie "Dimensions of Dialogue". Again, it is necessary to pay attention to the animation, here. Every movement is so fluid that we might forget for a brief second that the technique is analog.

2.4 Darkness, light, darkness

In "Darkness, light, darkness", also from 1989, we see a pair of hands interacting and, together, building a human body. Starting with eyes and ears, after that having a head, a mouth and a brain, everything is built to an extent where we see a human body made of clay completely trapped in a room that barely fits it.



Fig. 6: Jan Švankmajer's "Darkness, light, darkness" (1989)

The imagery here is so impressive. When the two feet get into the room they solely crush the head, which is rebuilt by the hands. This interaction, once again let us call it dialectical interaction, between the hands that built the human from its separated parts ends up creating a dreadful image in which we see a human body with soul crushing eyes trapped in a room, not being able to move and touching the light with the neck.



Fig. 7: Jan Švankmajer's "Darkness, light, darkness" (1989)

Here, we can observe the interaction between the body parts that forms humanity. Leading up to a devastating finale, we can see this dialogue between the parts trying to form a whole. The darkness fills up the ambient, movement and construction make the light and, at the end, with the light a different kind of darkness fills up the room.

3. Conclusion

Before we begin the conclusion, it is necessary to light up, as mentioned above, the vastful of interpretations that Švankmajer's work are able to generate. This short article could not in anyway take care of the richness of his work. So, this work tried to shine a light over four movies of the director with dialectics as the bias of interpretation.

Without aiming to wear out the multiplicity of themes and symbols existent in Švankmajer's work, this article's intent was to present his movies and connect them to the concepts of dialectics

present in the works of Aristotle and Plato. I hope this article contributes to the diffusion of the work of this master of filmmaking and can contribute to further researches of Švankmajer's work.

4. References

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