



JAN SVANKMAJER

By Jess Tindall-Foskett

INTRODUCTION

- Who is Jan Svankmajer?
- A Brief History of Czech Surrealism
- Methods and Mediums
- Case Study: Dimensions of Dialogue
- How has he influenced me?
- Conclusion
- Bibliography



Fig. 02

WHO IS JAN SVANKMAJER?

“One of the magic geniuses of Svankmajer is his ability to turn film, a strictly audio-visual medium, into a sensual, nearly synesthetic experience. With all of his films, ‘Conspirators’ in particular, one can practically taste, smell and feel the settings. His use of exaggerated, hyper-real sound effects and quick, Eisenstein-esque editing accentuate visuals which are already uncanny.” Jackson (1997)

Jan Svankmajer, a Czech Animator who joined the Czechoslovakian Surrealist movement in the 1970’s, has been recognised as one of the most influential contemporary filmmakers.

This is due in part to his diverse use of mediums as well as the uniquely ambiguous and uncanny lens he encourages his audience to look through.



Fig. 03

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CZECH SURRRREALISM

The subject of Czechoslovakian Surrealism goes hand in hand with that of the Czechoslovak New Wave movement, which can be defined as “betraying a surrealist sensibility, not least in its often eccentric black humour and sardonic wit.” Hames (2008) p.41

Czechoslovakia was home to a prolific number of successful animators that predate Svankmajer, that have continued to shape the medium even in present day. To name a few at a glance: , Karel Zeman, Hermína Týrlová and Jiří Trnka, famous for *The Hand* (1965).

Much of Eastern Europe, Czechoslovakia included, was severed from growing Western modernist ideals and sensibilities, which barely held animation in regard to film theory. This was arguably due to the Iron Curtain and subsequent Cold War. Meanwhile, countries such as Czechoslovakia had begun to develop an incredibly influential post-war animation movement.



Fig. 04

HISTORICAL + SOCIOPOLITICAL IMPACTS

The momentous Warsaw Pact Invasion in 1968 influenced Svankmajer to join the Prague Surrealist movement in 1970. He has stated that all of his work since the “Velvet Revolution”, a nationwide protest that ended more than 40 years of Communism within the country, has been political. The political influence behind his work is undeniable and offers a bold and striking perspective behind the symbolisation of violence and conflict within his work.

It is widely considered that the uniquely subversive angle that the Czech New Wave movement takes is largely attributed to the oppressive presence of the Soviet Union from 1968 onwards. Svankmajer himself was victim to the censorship the Soviet Union enforced, which undeniably influenced his ability to practice filmmaking and other artistic mediums, as he subsequently didn't create any films up until the 80's

METHODS AND MEDIUMS

“Considered one of the greatest animators of all time, and cited as an inspiration by directors like Gilliam, Tim Burton and the Brothers Quay, Švankmajer uses a wide range of techniques: puppets, stop-motion, timelapse, clay-mation, 2D animation, pixilation.” Ferrucci, Good Short Films

Svankmajer is known for utilising found objects and stop motion alongside live action, which creates an almost disjointed sense of reality. He works heavily with the principle of **associative relations**, fusing contrary objects together to conjure feelings of discomfort, which “essentially opens up a narrative dialectic between the two image forms.” Wells (1998), Pg. 93.



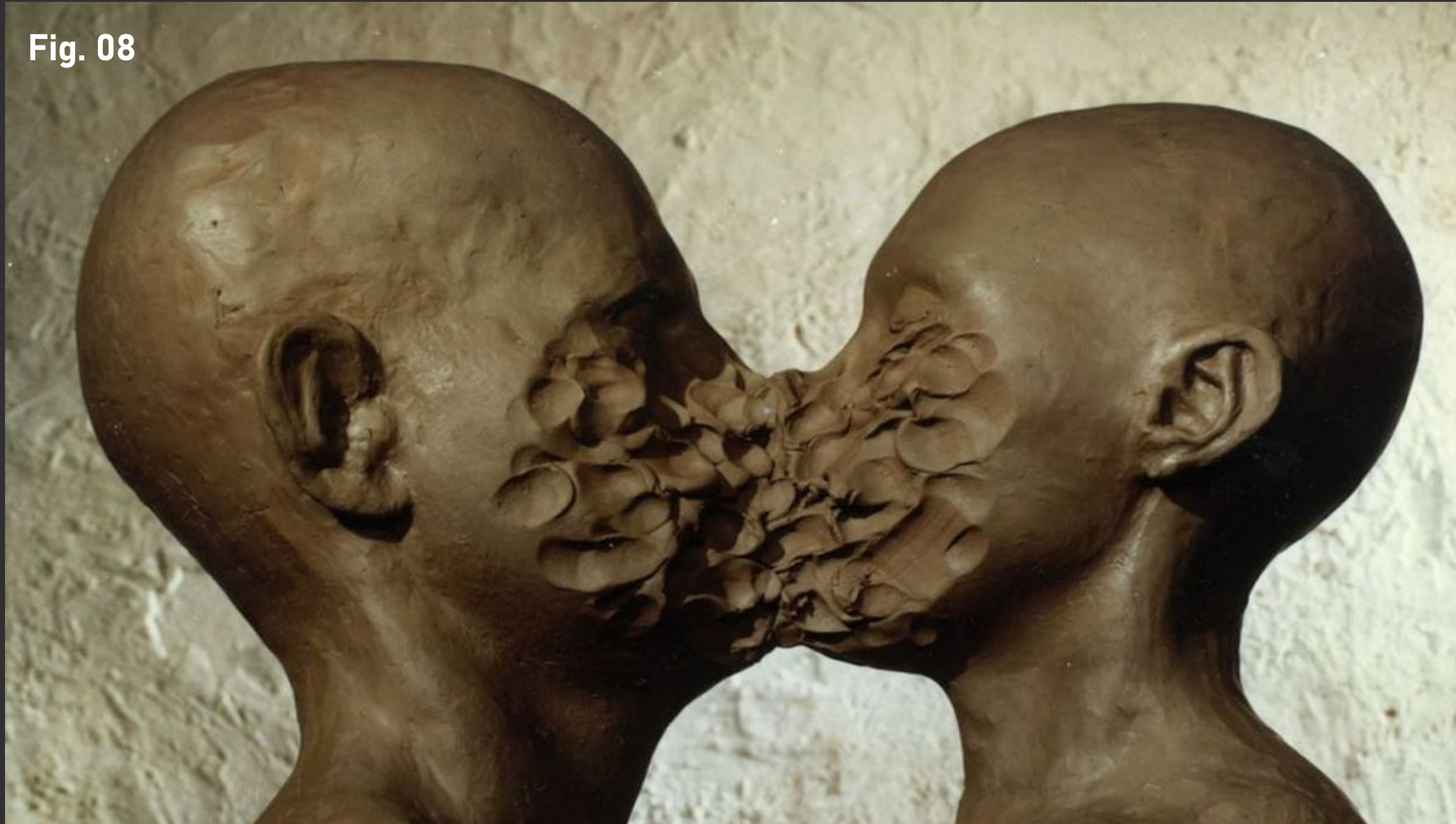
Fig. 05



Fig. 06

Fig. 07

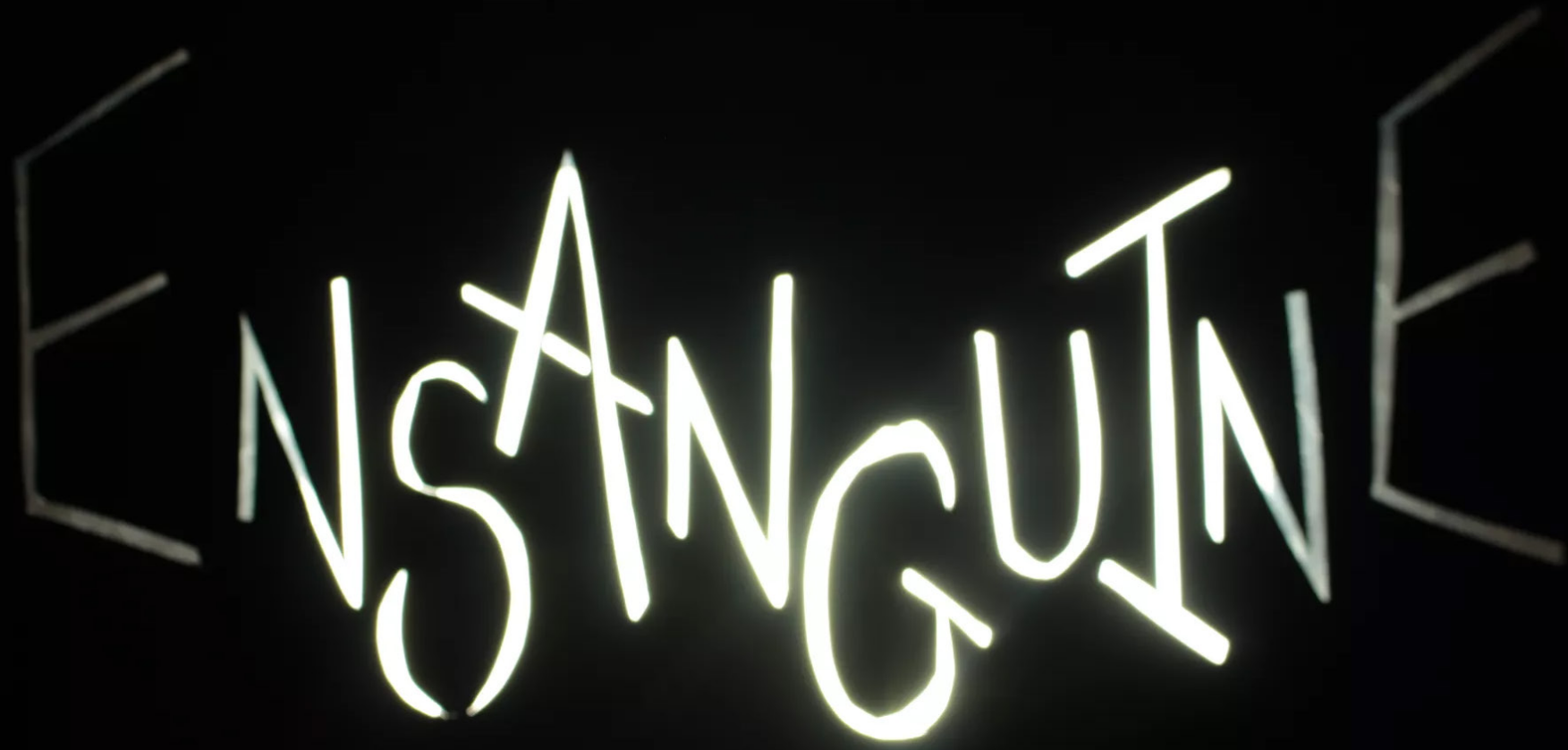
CASE STUDY: DIMENSIONS OF DIALOGUE (1983)



“Divided in three parts, it can be considered as a decidedly pessimistic study on different types of human interaction we face everyday, and how the outcomes of these exchanges can be disastrous.” Ferrucci, Good Short Films

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-gGpWpra-g&ab_channel=PP2

HIS INFLUENCE ON MY WORK



I have an infinite amount of admiration for puppet making and stop motion as a medium and learning about how Svankmajer influenced so many directors I grew up on has widened my understanding of the landscape of Surrealist animation.

Svankmajer's films are often framed from the perspective of a child, which adds to the uncanny and otherwordly feel as children have a very unique perspective of the world. This has made me consider the different perspectives I've wanted to portray in my own work. I have tried to evoke Svankmajers' style and colour palette in my own stop motion film, here are examples!



Fig. 09

Fig. 10

CONCLUSION

My preferred primary research method is to emulate the creative process of the artist I am studying. I find that creating pastiches of their work is an incredibly effective way to enable myself to understand the artist's perspective. Going forward, if I were to explore more extended routes of research, I would probably look more in depth at the Czech artists that predecease Svankmajer and the ways that the Surrealist Movement has evolved to meet shifting political climates, alongside more theorists and critics within Surrealism, Stop Motion and Animation as a whole.

To conclude my presentation: Czech animation, specifically the works of Jan Svankmajer, are an incredible source of inspiration and passion for me, due to a range of factors such as the evocative choice of medium, Surrealist style and cultural influence. To elaborate, cultural influence is in reference to the political significance of the production of his films, as well as the undeniable mark his work has made on the Animation movement and the production of stop motion by other artists since.

Thank you for listening!

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FIGURES

Figure 01

Svankmajer J. 1988. Still from Alice. [Image].

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Figure 02

Svankmajer J. 1988. Still from Decalogue. [Image].

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Figure 03

Svankmajer J. 1988. Picture of Svankmajer at work. [Image].

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Figure 04

Svankmajer J. 1964. Still from The Last Trick. [Image].

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Figure 05

Svankmajer J. 1994. Still from Faust. [Image].

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Figure 06

Svankmajer J. 1983 Still from Down to the Cellar [Image].

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Figure 07

Svankmajer J. 1994. Still from Faust [Image].

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Figure 08

Svankmajer J. 1983. Still from Dimensions of Dialogue [Image].

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Figure 09

Tindall-Foskett J. 2022. Title card from Ensanguine. [Image].

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Figure 10

Tindall-Foskett J. 2022. Title card from Ensanguine. [Image].

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