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# Forgotten Toyhood

## I Introduction: The Lives of Puppets and Toys

Puppets carry with them the traces of their past. This is not a metaphysical statement: they accrete surface damage, their joints become loose, strings wear out, their features are coarsened from overuse. We invest them with memories, nostalgia, history. Again, this need not be understood as any kind of ensoulment, but rather as a description of how we represent, think, and talk about puppets. Penny Francis has claimed that, 'at the very least a residue of animism, the belief in the spirit residing within everything that is apparently inert, is universally present in twenty-first-century humans; [...] this explains the power of the staged puppet' (FRANCIS 2012: 6). This is a tempting, if untestable and commonly espoused idea, but not strictly necessary to explaining why we ask puppets to bear our nostalgic baggage for historic beliefs. We could make similar claims for any objects, tools and furniture that occupy and decorate our environments, populating the spaces of our lives with their little parcels of semiotic build-up. However, puppets are different from other objects. They are built, usually by hand, from regular materials including, traditionally, wood and cloth, but they are *designed* to be receptacles for exactly this kind of emotional investment and historical freight. The puppet, then, is both a historical object (we can study the aesthetic history and development of puppet design, performance styles, trends in dramaturgy) and an object of history (we can read historical change in the bodies of the puppets, and see their age written on their surfaces).

Related to this conceptualisation of what puppets are, is the question of what puppets are habitually requested to *do*. According to Peter Schumann, the Polish-born founder of the Bread and Puppet Theater company, puppetry is:

an art which by fate and spirit does not aspire to represent governments or civilisations, but prefers its own secret and demeaning stature in society, representing, more or less, the demons of that society and definitely not its institutions. (Peter Schumann, quoted in FRANCIS 2012: 12)

This countercultural bent, evident in the way puppets play out a twisted, diminished parallel version of reality, has marked almost all histories of puppet theatre, while puppets themselves are simultaneously branded as entertainers of children as a consequence of this same diminution. There is a contrast, then, between these perceptions of puppetry's associations with political dissent, as Schumann claims, and the idea that puppets might be tools of socialisation via their use in play, education and therapy for children.

More or less every study of puppetry that I have so far encountered at some point makes space to defend the art form from any detractors who might dismiss it as child's play, or compare its figures to dolls or toys. I see no need for such a defence, firstly because art for children should not automatically be met with dismissal, and because I want to examine the meaningful family resemblances between puppets, dolls and toys. Their diminutive stature, the miniature analogues of the world they inhabit, posits them as iconographic players of games with artificial bodies, sometimes put on for paying audiences in formal theatrical settings, and sometimes performed by a solitary child in a nursery, using the puppet/doll's body as a prompt for engagement with imaginary spaces. 'Puppetry's close affinity to things fantastic', says Francis, 'effectively reflects children's darker fantasies' (FRANCIS 2012: 8).

Toys and puppets are both miniature proxies that may help us to work through questions of being in the world and to practise the actions and situations that will socialise us for living in that world for real. They are pivot points between real and imaginary worlds, markers of that borderline space between abstract imagining and real-world physical consequences. Toys are the training wheels of citizenry, the props in the playful performances of children learning the roles they will be asked to take up in society. In his essay on toys for the volume *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes observed that toys construct a child 'as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it: there are, prepared for him, actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy' (BARTHES 1972: 54). Some toys, however, such as building blocks, allow some creativity, and turn players into animators: 'the actions he performs are not those of a user but those of a demiurge. He creates forms which walk, which roll, he creates life, not property: objects now act by themselves, they are no longer an inert and complicated material in the palm of his hand' (54). Puppets can be just such toys: they may be anthropomorphic in the same way that dolls and action figures are anthropomorphic, but the difference is that puppets are specifically built and articulated to allow a user to 'animate' the small body in her hands, to take control of the forms of its representation. Puppets are not like other objects: they are semiotically marked by whatever anatomical or physiognomic visemes

have been built into their design, but otherwise empty of meaning, waiting for, or rather *needing*, the agency of an operator to give them meaning through action.

Puppets have long been given pedagogic roles to play. An editorial in *The UNESCO Courier* in 1955 (a special issue on puppetry) noted the educational value of puppets in schools and development programmes:

Teachers who have pulled strings or manipulated fists and fingers realise the power of puppetry in freeing the student from self-consciousness and physical limitations, and in releasing untapped depths of emotion and imagination. Puppetry is a unifying factor in the school curriculum. Through it, pupils gain both in their social relationships and in knowledge and skills. Making a puppet and building a puppet theatre develops skill in drawing, cutting, carving, modelling, embroidering, and painting. Staging a puppet play develops imagination and writing ability and is excellent training for the eye and the ear ... Where other educational methods have failed, the puppet has often succeeded in getting results. ([KOFFLER] 1955: 3)

Jurkowski tells us that in Bohemia, 'the puppet players actively participated in the renaissance of the Czech nationality' (JURKOWSKI 1996: 277). At the start of the Thirty Years War in 1620, Bohemia lost its independence and came under the strict governance of the Austrian Habsburg monarchy, which enforced a policy of Germanisation. In the late eighteenth century, this was somewhat liberalised and allowed a 'Czech intelligentsia' to restore some Czech institutions such as the Homeland Theatre (opened in 1786), where they were allowed to perform in the Czech language. Beyond these elite theatres, provincial performances by puppet plays used the language and the history to develop a strain of patriotic puppet theatre that could be toured to even the most remote regions. Through the work of puppetry pedagogues like Jindřich Veselý (1885–1939), there was a concerted effort to develop the arts, and amateur marionette theatre 'specialised as children's theatre with a predominantly didactic function' (BLECHA 2011: 117). The association between marionette theatre and children's educational entertainment has, according to Blecha, never been entirely broken. More to the point, puppets and toys both provide safe places for play, where censorship and authority might otherwise stifle the imagination of other ways of thinking.

As Veronika Ambros has argued, twentieth-century Modernist theatre practitioners 'questioned the mimetic, realistic, and naturalistic practice of the theatre by introducing diverse effigies and puppets on stage and screen' (AMBROS 2012: 74). While theorisation of the aesthetics of puppet performance by Heinrich von Kleist, Edward Gordon Craig, Otakar Zich and Petr Bogatyrev was of a piece with broader efforts to subvert the realist traditions of theatre, it also helped to dissolve some of the longstanding associations between puppetry and children's entertainment. But, at least for the purposes of this essay, I want to explore approvingly that very association. As Peter Hames remarks, 'For those who applied the sign systems of conventional theatre, puppets might appear

strange but for those who accepted its particular system (children, for instance) puppets ceased to be mysterious' (HAMES 2008: 85). The suggestion is that children understand that puppet theatre operates at a certain metaphorical level, representing something *about* the world without quite being *of* the world, either because of some instinct present in children but less available to adults, or because children customarily spend their time amongst miniature objects of play and make-believe.

More than in most other countries, puppetry has been granted extensive support in Czech culture, finding especially strong purchase in animated films. Bruno Bettelheim suggests that fairy tale reflect a child's animistic worldview, where 'since there is no sharp line drawn between living and dead things, the latter, too, can come to life' (BETTELHEIM 1976: 47). Puppet animation, by creating an illusion of vital movement out of dead static matter, similarly confounds those binary distinctions between the living and the dead, between the concrete and the imagined. In this essay, I will look at three puppet-based Czech feature films that help to develop the links between toys and puppets, Jan Švankmajer's *Alice (Něco z Alenky)*, 1988), Jiří Barta's *In the Attic (Na půdě aneb Kdo má dneska narozeniny?*, 2009) and Jan Svěrák's *Kuky (Kuky se vrací)*, 2010). In their portrayal of discarded and/or forgotten toys, they proffer ways to think about what those little bodies might represent, and how they are used in specifically filmic ways to probe the liminal spaces between social propriety and outlying behaviours. Stories of lost toys work allegorically at different levels. The most obvious is that they may simply be stories about toys and their singular importance in our lives as icons of play, learning and socialisation. The toy may even be a metonym for all of childhood, and the image of the living toy a fulfilment of Freud/Jentsch's uncanny childish wish for the dolls and toys to come to life. Puppets have now fallen from their ancestral origins as sacred objects, but risen again from their lowly status as children's playthings. They retain nevertheless traces and markers of both the deific and the childlike. These films may feature fairy- or folk-tale structures, but they also are deeply devoted to bringing forth the allegorical, socio-political, cultural or commentative functions that have always attached to Czech puppetry, repurposing them for use in filmic contexts.

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## II Švankmajer's Portents and Junk

Roman Páska divides puppet styles into the *illusionists*, who attempt to create the impression that the puppet is an independent agent, primarily by hiding the mode of operation (strings, hands, rods, etc.); and the *primitivists*, who focus on the presentation of their puppets as 'interdependent objects'. Illusionistic puppets find their greatest site of expression in the cinema:

where the puppet can enjoy an ontological status equal to the objectified human actor. But in the cinema, with its aura of ambitiously heightened realism, the specificity of the

puppet is often smothered by its frequency of exchange with mannequins, masks, automata, stop-action animation figures, dummies, robots and other staples of the animation, fantasy and horror genres. In the service of a comprehensive cinematic illusion, the image of the puppet character, often created only in the cutting room as an assemblage of physically dissociated pieces, supersedes the value of the puppet as a discrete object or thing. (PÁSKA 1990: 39)

Film has been a key component in the development, preservation and international reputation of Czech puppetry from the twentieth century to date, while puppet aesthetics have contributed much to the Czech animated films that have gained international renown. Films preserve the movements and actions of puppets in a way that theatrical performances cannot. I do not wish to suggest that these films *reveal* Czech puppetry: they all use methods of animation that are clearly distinct from theatrical marionette shows, for instance (some theorists of puppetry might not admit stop-motion as a comparable form of puppetry at all, since it lacks the component of live, direct manipulation). Puppets and puppeteers preserve a sort of muscle-memory of previous styles. We often glean genealogical histories from the bodies of the puppets, but we would be able to perform similar historical taxonomies if we were to analyse the ways puppets move (the affordances of their bodies) and the ways in which they are moved (the techniques of the operator).

The films of Jan Švankmajer have often served a similar kind of archival function by focusing on the texture, shape or motile capacities of everyday objects. Švankmajer's battered, pre-worn sets, objects and puppets immediately invoke a palimpsestic pastness (archaic cultural forms worked over by the modern medium of film), a dirtied history. As Roger Cardinal has noted, 'Objects which manage to be both portents and junk can be said to exert a special fascination for Švankmajer, who [...] prefers his curiosities to bear traces of usage' (CARDINAL 2008: 74). Švankmajer sees puppets as invested with some kind of occult power, a residual life force accrued from contact with previous owners, or at least this is a metaphor he commonly uses to talk about puppets. This is the opposite of the Kleistian/Craigian notion of the puppet as some kind of perfect performer by virtue of its emptiness, its lack of inner life and personality:

For me objects always were more alive than people. More permanent and also more expressive. They are more exciting for their latent content and for their memories, which far exceed the memories of men. Objects conceal within themselves the events they have witnessed [...] I have always tried in my films to 'excavate' this content from objects, to listen to them and then illustrate their story [...] This creates a meaningful relationship between man and things, founded on dialogue, not on consumer principles. (Jan Švankmajer, quoted in HAMES 2008: 152)

Objects are thus ‘charged’ by their contact with the world, and become ‘susceptible under certain condition of delivering up their contents and, on contact, of revealing associations of ideas and resemblances from our own unconscious impulses’ (Jan Švankmajer quoted in GRANT 2001: 186). The role of the animator is to enact this process of excavating the meaningful contents of objects and expressing it in a communicative medium, in Švankmajer’s case, film.

Rescuing objects from their status as devices of consumer culture, Švankmajer does not sentimentalise them through anthropomorphosis, but rather absolves them of responsibility for the uses to which humans have put them. In *Jabberwocky* (1971), for instance, Švankmajer uses dolls and their mutilation to explore the degradation of the subject in the process of socialisation. That is, dolls become metaphors for the ways people’s bodies are not their own, but rather the blank objects onto which are carved the pressures and injunctions of families and society. *Jabberwocky*’s dolls start out as the innocent embodiments of childhood, playthings invested with life by the animation process. Birthed out of the inert body of a larger doll, they are installed in a house that spins them round and spits them out to be ground into food for more dolls. They are ironed flat, boiled and baked to sustain a cannibalistic circle of stunted life and grotesque death. The process instils automatic reflexes of obedience and mindless mimicry, and dolls, transformed into automata under the animator’s manipulations, are the perfect vessels for this manipulative thesis. The dolls’ innocence is destroyed by a series of disciplinary processes that knock them into submissive shape. The animation has taken objects of free, imaginative play, and shown that the ‘contents’ they have delivered up are their social purpose as instruments of disciplinary trammelling.

In his *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924, André Breton argued that the innocent imagination of the child is, over time, forced into the constraints of sanctioned rationalism, incapable of love or fanciful thought because of the:

imperative practical necessity which demands his constant attention [...] This imagination which knows no bounds is henceforth allowed to be exercised only in strict accordance with the laws of an arbitrary utility; it is incapable of assuming this inferior role for very long and, in the vicinity of the twentieth year, generally prefers to abandon man to his lustreless fate. (BRETON 2003: 143–4)

Childhood remains a happy ideal, a reminder of a prelapsarian imaginative state with which Breton hoped Surrealist activism could reconnect. Drawing upon his own childhood experiences (that is, his sensory recollections rather than actual occurrences), Švankmajer adapted Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* for the screen in 1988, following most of the original story’s sequences of events, but applying his distinctive tactile grotesquery to Carroll’s dream logic and nonsense-speak.

In *Alice*, toys are part of Alice’s imaginative landscape, and when they come to life, it is the oneiric vivification of what we might presume is her nursery, but Švankmajer

doesn't make the distinction easy to make by signalling the transition from dream to reality. Similarly, the toys and puppets are intermingled with taxidermy specimens, hybrid skeletons and other moving objects. In the tea party sequence, the March Hare is a stuffed toy with button eyes, operated with a clockwork key, and the Mad Hatter is a classic Czech marionette, possibly in the guise of Don Quixote, still bearing his strings, with no visible operator.

*Alice's* structure is rather like a cabinet of curiosities, a series of containers (rooms) in which an array of animal and artifactual exhibits are presented. Similar 'taxonomic' structures can be seen in many of Švankmajer's short films, including *Dimensions of Dialogue*; *Historia Naturae*; *Suita* and *The Ossuary*: these films are not driven by narrative or character development, but instead arranged around the graphic or classificatory connections between objects. *Alice* is a composite of disparate objects, scenes, moments and actions that, in their different states and uneasy combinations, produce a structured discourse on the constructed nature of reality. In the sequence where Alice descends in an elevator to a lower level of 'wonderland' (it is never thus called in the film, and is pictured in stark contrast to other, more vibrant adaptations of the story), she passes multiple levels of objects arranged on shelves. The first level we see gathers toys including marionettes, paper theatre puppets, building blocks and a magic lantern. Another shows a basket containing Punch and Judy glove puppets. Below this there are fruits in pickle jars, including marmalade laced with drawing pins, one of many perverse tactile and gustatory games played with food. These items are connected only by their associations with Švankmajer's obsessions as expressed in his films: the cabinet of curiosities, like the puppet, is another of Švankmajer's favourite motifs, fuelled by his confessed interest in Rudolfine art, and the legendary *Kunstammer* of Rudolf II, which lacked any discernible system of organisation but sought primarily to 'capture the riches of the world in miniature' (BUKOVINSKA 2005: 206) – see also Švankmajer's recurrent references to the composite portraits of Giuseppe Arcimboldo, court painter to Rudolf II's court in Prague.

Like Rudolf II's cabinet of curiosities, Švankmajer's films unsettle rigid binary categories by refusing to allow the easy identification of even the most basic categories such as time, space, life and death. This upholds one of the tenets of the manifesto issued jointly by the Paris and Prague Surrealists in April 1968, *The Platform of Prague*, in which the group:

insists upon its refusal to admit the categories of reality (psychic reality, social reality and natural reality) as definitive. To be resigned to a reality petrified into such partitioning would lead to the privileging of one at the expense of the other two of these three conditions, subjectivity, inter-subjectivity and the objective world. Surrealist efforts precisely tend to the abolition of these categories, which implies recognition of their transitory nature.' (RICHARDSON and KRZYSZTOF FIJAŁKOWSKI 2001: 61)

Švankmajer was not a member of the group until 1970, but he was a signatory to *The Platform of Prague 20 Years On*, which ‘signalled the theme of the phenomenology of the imagination as a major focus’ (FIJAŁKOWSKI 2005: 4). Surrealists appropriated the cabinet of curiosity’s use of the object as a thing of fascination and wonder beyond its intended use, something functional that is so rare it becomes a ‘specimen’ or a ‘marvel’ again. As Mauriès observes:

A number of Surrealists, starting with Breton and Eluard, were avid collectors, a fact which is not surprising given that from the outset the object *qua* object, whether mundane or exotic, craft or art, in its natural state or combined with others, played a role of fundamental importance in the sensibility and aesthetic of Surrealism. (MAURIÈS 2002: 216)

The Surrealists under Breton wanted to explore the strangeness of objects, the way they operate as placeholders for reality and the relationships between people and the phenomenological world. Objects were thus reinvested with the occult powers taken away by their rationalisation, their functionality and use value. Hence Breton’s promise to make ‘machines of highly skilled construction and no useful purpose.’

Švankmajer treats Alice’s various encounters like items in a filmic curiosity cabinet. This is why the creatures are not live animals but taxidermic specimens, either cobbled together from various skeletal parts, or stuffed whole, as with the White Rabbit, who leaks sawdust through tears in his hide. Animation might be seen as one of those uncanny things that treads the line between opposing, contradictory states and thus upsets classificatory boundaries. Švankmajer’s commitment to Surrealist activism requires him to muddy the lines between dreams and reality, for instance. For Švankmajer, everything is a puppet. He doesn’t separate the iconic meaning-making specialism of puppets from the kinetic and vital potential of *all* objects.

Patrick Mauriès has described the significantly dual nature of curiosities: ‘their intention was not merely to define, discover and possess the rare and the unique, but also, and at the same time, to inscribe them within a special setting which would instil in them layers of meaning’. The drawers, panels and display cases flattered an ‘impulse to slot each item into its place in a vast network of meanings and correspondences’ (MAURIÈS 2002: 25). Švankmajer’s fascination with the hybrid curiosities seems attached to nostalgia for a time before hierarchies were ossified and definitions and systems of control and classification enforced. According to Stephen T. Asma,

the educational value of any specimen (whether it’s a dissected organ or a stuffed animal) lies in its power to extend illumination beyond its own individuality. A true specimen is a species representative rather than its idiosyncratic particular. This explains why we freeze the otherwise fluctuating and transient individuals of nature into static universals. (ASMA 2001: 36)

But the oddities offered by the unclassifiable ‘curiosities’, such as the chimera Švankmajer creates by blending skeletons or costuming stuffed animals, are what Asma calls ‘ultimate individuals’ that break out of the usual taxonomic boxes. What’s more, by bringing such specimens into jerkily defiant life, Švankmajer lets them escape the freezing ‘time management’ of their taxidermic fates (ASMA 2001: 46). His creatures escape classification by refusing to stay dead or passively conform to species expectations. He shoots objects as if they are on display, square-framed and mounted for museum presentation. People in his films are also often addressing the camera directly, except that they’re addressing other people in the scene, and making the viewer’s perspective shuttle back and forth between them.

In *Conspirators of Pleasure*, Švankmajer uses things as intermediaries between people whose solitary fetishes almost connect them in networks of pleasure and desire, but which ultimately keep them physically remote from one another. Things help them to invest energy in their pleasures, even as they absorb the desires that could otherwise be acted out upon the body of another person. This is what happens in animation: inanimate objects are invested with motile energy. It is an unavoidable consequence of the process of animation. Again, by ‘energy’ I am not alluding to any spiritual force, and maybe ‘agency’ would be a better term (if it didn’t imply that the object itself is *active* – it is actually under complete control of a human operator), but rather pointing to the way in which animation activates the symbolic, semiotic, semic functions of the object by giving the illusion of movement and thus of life which pushes it onto a more equal footing with the sentient creatures (mostly humans) that we usually credit with meaning-making abilities. Peter Hames has suggested that the centrality of puppets in Švankmajer’s films is ‘the most obvious way in which he has depicted a “soulless” being reduced to a passive victim of a “brute reality”’ (HAMES 2008: 49). But his puppetry is not all in the service of depicting an ultimate passivity. Švankmajer re-invests his dead specimens with individuality by making them move and possess agency as characters in a fiction.

In Švankmajer’s filmic world, puppets, dolls, automata and animals are inseparable: they are all part of a machine-like environment that provides a symbolic proxy for our own, but this is not a comfortable division between artifice and reality: the two states overlap in troubling ways. In particular those objects that mixed the properties of *naturalia* and *artificialia*:

forged a link between two orders of reality where none existed, and which did so moreover for no apparent purpose and with a level of sophistication that appeared impossible to justify; objects that truly defied understanding. They gave physical expression, in so many minor epiphanies, to different idioms of the marvellous that could be analysed and described. (MAURIES 2002: 109)

As in the opening titles of *Punch and Judy* (1966), where a band of automaton monkeys performs the theme music using a combination of stop-motion and live clockwork operation, Švankmajer's techniques deliberately smudge the lines between hierarchies of artificial performance types, putting puppets and humans and everyday objects into challenging, often confronting arrangements and combinations, unsettling category distinctions and questioning habitual expectations of power and agency.

### III In the Attic of Jiří Barta's Puppet Toys

When he came to make *In the Attic* (released in 2009), Jiří Barta had not completed a film (with the exception of a few commercials and a computer-animated short) for two decades. He had worked for many years on a new version of the Golem story, but all that was finished was a seven-minute promotional trailer for presentation to potential investors. Having studied in the Animation Department at Prague's University of Applied Arts in 1969, he made his first animated shorts from 1978, working at the Jiří Trnka Studios. Many of his films are critiques of materialism and greed, broad enough in their allegories to escape the wrath of the communist censors, who tended to ignore the animated shorts that played before the main features anyway.<sup>1</sup> His final film before the long hiatus was *The Club of the Laid Off* (*Klub odložených*, 1989), a grimly amusing vignette about a group of unemployed mannequins. It conveys the boredom of a conformist society by using these 'bizarre objects' that are 'something between puppets and actors', but also the empty props of consumer society (BARTA quoted in BALLARD). The mannequins occupy a derelict building, mechanically repeating domestic tasks they vaguely understand. A female mannequin stirs a saucepan, another irons clothes, a man repeatedly leaves for and returns from work (which consists of sitting at a bare desk in an empty room). Their routines are interrupted when two deliverymen come to take some of the figures away and replace them with a squad of new models, who play loud music, dance and fuck. Rather than anthropomorphising the movements of these already humanoid characters, Barta preserves their jerky actions, restricted as they are

1 *Disc Jockey* (1980), told entirely using a relentless series of circular images (a plug hole, a sink, badges, clocks, speedometers, road signs, vinyl records), suggests a society rule-bound by material things and instructions. *The Project* (1981) shows, through the animated blueprints for tenement housing, diverse families, represented by their colourful paintings, cultural objects, clothes and furniture, pressed into conformity until all difference is erased and the final plan shows a grid of identical families in identical blocks. For *The Vanished World of Gloves* (1982), Barta imagined the discovery of a stash of films made by and about gloves, as if the hands of the puppeteer were themselves puppetised and invested with creative agency. He turned the Germanic legend of *The Pied Piper* into a bloody and grotesque gothic morality tale, carving his near-two-dimensional puppets ('a little bit like machines, just puppets') mostly from wood, giving them an angular, iconic look with the flattened style of the puppet theatre (BARTA quoted in BALLARD). The people of Hamelin are greedy and gluttonous, and for their refusal to pay the piper who rids them of an infestation of rats (notably, the rats, played in many shots by live rodents, attack the town from within rather than invading it from outside: they are the natural outgrowth of a sick society), they are transformed into rats and driven to their deaths over a cliff.

by minimal articulation at their joints: they are still marked by the limitations of their ascribed roles as posers of human activities and not fully enabled participants. At the end of the film, a truce is reached, where the old mannequins have accommodated the new arrivals (both groups are, after all, just icons of passing fads), but their modernity is signalled by showing them covered in brand logos.

In *Marxism and Form*, Fredric Jameson discusses the significance of the mannequin to the Surrealists:

The mannequin: veritable emblem of the sensibility of a whole age, supreme totem of the Surrealist transformation of life – in which the human body itself comes before us as a product, where the nagging awareness of another presence, as in the terror of the blue gaze that meets us from the doll's eyes, the secret premonition of a lifeless voice somehow about to address us, all figure emblematically the central discovery by Surrealism of the properties of the objects that surrounded it. [...] Henceforth, in what we may call postindustrial capitalism, the products with which we are furnished are utterly without depth: their plastic content is totally incapable of serving as a conductor of psychic energy, if we may express ourselves that way. (JAMESON: 104–5)

Since the mannequins, then, are manufactured to model the practice of human life and not to participate fully in it, we might suggest that they do not fully serve the memory-storing capacities that Švankmajer attributes to other objects. They are too obviously narrow in their function as illustrations rather than creative agents in themselves. But that might be to stretch Švankmajer's metaphor too far. Mannequins are not quite puppets, since their job is even more proscribed, frozen in place. They personify lifestyles and social relations in rigid postures unsuited to imaginative play. In *Capital*, Marx mentions that the product's status as a commodity depends on 'the personification of things and conversion of production relations into entities' (in the *Capital*, III, 809). For Bárta, the winsome and needling anthropomorphism of consumer goods is a recurring theme and a regular irritant.

If the wasteful by-products of human over-consumption as represented by the mannequins of *Club of the Laid Off* were treated with disdain in that film, *In the Attic* takes a milder tone in its depiction of the lives of 'laid off' toys. It is clear that this project was more obviously commercial than Bárta's earlier efforts, and aimed at a young audience, though it is nevertheless structured around a robust political allegory about totalitarianism. In their dust-coated attic, a group of well-worn, played-out toys wake to go through their daily routine – rolling a dice to determine whose birthday it's going to be. There's Schubert, cobbled together out of bits and pieces, a body of Plasticine and a bottle-top on his head; Sir Handsome, a traditional Czech marionette and Don Quixote figure who speaks in verse and imagines himself a dragon-slaying knight, though his sword has been replaced with a pencil; Teddy, a gruff old bear who runs the attic's steam train; Buttercup, a ragdoll, who ministers to them all with maternal diligence. Together, they staff the model railway that

gives them a work schedule, organising their working lives around transportation for the other toys. The 'Land of Evil', a separate room in the attic where toys fear to tread, is ruled over by the Golden Head, modelled on the busts of party officials or heads of state that were commonly seen in Czech businesses during the Cold War. Since he cannot move, he has set up a system of surveillance in the attic, with teams of spies and recording devices. A long plastic tube with a glass eye at one end snakes around the attic, watching its inhabitants secretly. A black cat serves as a spy, performing the same sinister, interlocking role played by black cats in Švankmajer's *Jabberwocky* and Bárta's *Club of the Laid Off*, while a grinning earwig crawls into his ear canal to deliver privileged information. Just as the toys, no longer played with, continue their vocations in apparent perpetuity, so the Golden Head sustains the memory of a communist-era police state by masterminding by proxy the manipulation of life in the attic. Played by a human actor in heavy make-up, immobilised except for eyes, mouth, and hands that can leave their body to retune the TV station or pick up the phone, the Head behaves like a (semi-)living statue, an image of a body rather than its actuality. He occupies a state somewhere between animated and alive, between synthetic and organic, accumulating acolytes and apparatus in his lair of stasis and stagnation while the productive toys carry on their lives below, unaware that they are being watched.

When Buttercup is kidnapped by the Head's henchmen, the story becomes a simple linear quest to rescue her but much of the film's more nuanced creation of meaning is mostly delegated to the design of the toys and of the attic itself. The whole set bristles with diminutive details: a chess-piece family routinely bobs aboard the train; cogs, wheels, pistons and gadgets spin, pump and whirr; pillows float in the sky, snowing feathers; bed sheets flow like a river; sackcloth flaps in the air like carrion crows. The attic is their whole world, an alternative space where everything from the human world finds its analogue in the places and spaces managed by the toys.

When Bárta's toys take the train, they are suddenly depicted as two-dimensional cartoon figures, since this is when, according to Bárta, they are in their own imaginative space, away from human eyes. It sets up a hierarchy of techniques, some closer to reality, others closer to imagination. Teddy dreams in sketchy cartoon animation, too, as if puppets themselves, were they alive, would use different levels of representation to imagine their own dream lives, just as humans deploy expressionistic or anti-realistic devices and styles such as stop-motion animation to represent their imaginary or inner lives.<sup>2</sup> Sir Handsome still has, attached to the top of his head, the rod that would have been manipulated by a puppeteer in the marionette theatre where he once presumably performed. But without an operator, he is clumsy

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2 This kind of flattened out, domesticated puppet body from the popular paper theatres that were designed for use in the home (see BLECHA 2011) is seen in a number of Švankmajer shorts, and may also have influenced the cut-out world of several of Karel Zeman's features, including *Vynález Zkázky / Deadly Invention* (1958) and *Baron Prášil / Baron Munchausen* (1961), which imitate the surface style of engraved illustrations in picture books, and the flats and pop-up scenery of toy theatres.

and delusional, still clinging to the vestigial conviction that he is a romantic warrior; his delusions match the character of a puppet believing that he is really the characters he was made to play, *and* the persona of Don Quixote, after whom he has been modelled.<sup>3</sup>

Bárta has clearly been inspired by Švankmajer, and finds a similar poignancy in the private lives of dolls, the sacred, haunted objects of childhood and their ability to absorb and reflect the meanings invested in them. This is less macabre than Švankmajer's *Jabberwocky* (though a shot of dolls' limbs boiling in a pot might be a homage), where dolls are portrayed as the proxies for human cycles of indoctrination, conformity and authoritarianism, but there's a similar metaphor in play. Bárta has stated that *In the Attic* is both a children's film and a reflection upon Czech history. Although stories about living toys (*Toy Story* in particular) are well known internationally, Bárta echoes Švankmajer's sense of objects retaining an energetic charge from their contact with the world when he says that he 'wanted to show that the toys carry on living their lives after the children have forgotten them, or even after the adults have put them in the attic as 'a memory' but do not really think about them' (cited in BALLARD 2003: 137).

Here, as in *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995), there's a precarious relationship between humans and toys – the dolls need to conceal their independent existence from their owners, to deny the very nature of that ownership. A young girl, Andrea and her grandma occasionally interrupt the action of the toys' world, petrifying them back into inanimation. These moments might show up the insignificance of the toys' world – it is easily switched back into a diminutive objectness. If *Toy Story* celebrated the vitality of toys, their willingness and ability to serve their human masters and inspire their imagination, it also had a whiff of melancholy at the impermanence of that relationship. Toys do not grow, age or reproduce. They *need* their owners in ways that are not fully reciprocated. Bárta's film tries to reassure us that the toys retain their independence, going about their business regardless, even in spite of the humans who live below them. These characters carry a sense-memory of their former function as toys, replaying the roles they were assigned from birth, and therein lies a gentle description of a para-world of social roles and ritualised behaviours. If *Alice* saw Švankmajer aggressively disturbing the concept of social identity by dropping his protagonist into a nest of boundary-crossing creatures, Bárta's attic is a space of accommodation, if not resignation, to the resilience of social structures.

3 The first work of Czech Expressionism was Viktor Dyk's *The Enlightenment of Don Quixote* directed at Vinohrady Theatre, 1914 by Frantisek Zavřel. The First Prague Exhibition of Puppetry took place in 1911.

## IV 'In the forest we don't play games': *Kuky se vrací*

Jan Svěrák's *Kuky se vrací* (2010; released in the US under the title *Kooky*, though the English translation might be closer to 'Kooky comes home', 'Kooky Returns' or 'Kooky's Return') offers a modern approach to the appropriation and remediation of Czech puppet techniques. Young Ondra's beloved teddy bear, Kuky, is thrown into the rubbish as his mother encourages him to grow out of such childish things: the boy is severely asthmatic, and since Kuky's fabric attracts dust he is deemed an unsuitable, even dangerous companion. Awakening on a landfill site, Kuky begins a long journey through the woods to find his way back home. Pursued by the creatures that grow from and live in the rubbish heap, who want to claim him as their property, Kuky takes shelter with the sprites of the forest, organic beings (many of them resembling vegetables) that live alongside the birds and the rabbits. Kuky's arrival kicks off a struggle for influence between Captain von Hergot, elderly Guardian of the forest, and Nushka, his power-crazy would-be usurper.

Svěrák uses a kind of 'dark theatre' to remove the presence of the puppeteer from the scene and blend Kuky with a modern children's drama: digital technology is used to make these removals, so Kuky's full body can be shown with no visible signs of a puppeteer in shot. Removing the hands that move toys from the frame (as Švankmajer did in *Alice*: we can imagine that Alice is playing with the toys and we are seeing a visualisation of her games where she envisages them as having agency of their own) suggests that they have agency, but also denies the formal attributes of puppet theatre where the presence of the operator would have some meaningful input into the presentation. Kuky's mouth does not move. Instead he is voiced by the narrator, Ondra himself, played by the director's son, Ondřej Svěrák. This preserves a kind of puppetic relationship between the boy and his toy: even if he is not manipulating Kuky by hand, he is animating the doll by projecting a fantastic sense of the world onto it. Švankmajer's *Alice* also serves as the narrator and imaginer of the action, her lips framed in extreme close-up for every line of dialogue.

*Kuky's* puppetry is therefore 'live', in that the principal photography of the main puppet characters was recorded on the set for most scenes, and then the puppeteers, wires, rods and other rigs were removed digitally in post production. The puppetry is thus traditional in the sense of linking operator and object directly, by muscle and manipulation, and this is of a piece with the film's treatment of the relationships between different levels of nature and artifice. The shallow-focus photography brings the puppets much closer to the spectator than puppet theatre would ordinarily be able to do, bringing the action to the level of the puppets themselves, but it also emphasises the tactile surfaces of the objects and spaces. Since the differences between characters are essentially based on their materials of composition (plastic, organic, etc.), this makes sense. But *Kuky* is really about a child coming to terms with the world and how some people are excluded from

society: Kuky's adventure is a waking dream that Ondra extrapolates from his everyday experience, allegorising the boy's incipient sense of the structure of society. Captain von Hergot is in reality, Ondra believes, a homeless alcoholic the boy meets in a supermarket car park, on the very peripheries of consumer society. And because Ondra is dreaming this all, and is 'playing' Kuky by bringing him to imaginative life, the direct causal link between a puppet and operator provided by this mode of puppet performance is a perfect method for representing this relationship between imagination and action.

Kuky's struggle with the internecine squabbling amongst the forest-dwellers is played out as a quasi-ethnic conflict between plastic and organic, between domestic goods and wild nature. Upon their first meeting Captain von Hurgot probes Kuky's 'fake fur', questioning his status as a domestic toy with 'no job': 'You don't belong here. In the forest we don't play games; this is real life. Animals here have to fight to survive and get cold for real!' In his *Mythologies* essay on toys, Barthes notes that plastic toys have taken away the natural, tactile pleasures of play: 'the plastic material of which they are made has an appearance at once gross and hygienic, it destroys all the pleasure, the sweetness, the humanity of touch' (Barthes 1972: 54). For Barthes, industrial production of toys not only torques kids into the shape and form of bourgeois clones of their docile pre-socialised parents, it divorces them from nature and separates labour from the age of the craftsman. *Kuky* does not offer a simple treatise about the virtues of organic over synthetic in its depiction of Kuky's adventures in the forest. Kuky ultimately rescues von Hergot and restores him to his benign, wise authority and expels Nushka from his corrupt rule.

These three toy films memorialise the puppet theatre, even as they attenuate its influence into specifically filmic forms of animation. The classic Czech puppet theatre risks becoming ossified as a heritage practice, ossified for the benefit of tourists. Švankmajer wanted to make everyday objects strange, vivaciously resistant to tasks for which they have been designed, with the logical conclusion that 'everyday contact with things which people are used to acquires a new dimension and in this way casts a doubt over reality' (ŠVANKMAJER quoted in WELLS 1998: 11).<sup>4</sup> Bárta plays a similar game by showing his lively objects grappling with their roles and duties, but the metaphor has itself been somewhat commodified for the family-friendly format of *Toys in the Attic's* commentary on consumer culture. In *Kuky se vrací*, we see a fully mainstreamed attenuation of the same impulse to use toys and puppets as signifiers of the ruined end of cultural and social life. Modernist theories of puppetry, as espoused by the famous work of Edward Gordon Craig and others, asserted the godlike, iconic power of the puppet to serve as a physical placeholder for a superhuman consciousness, paradoxically because it lacked consciousness and could therefore be made to perform without the interfering inflections of human desire and distraction. By demoting the puppet to the status of object (albeit one invested by its owners with psychic, nostalgic or connotative powers), these films give it back its (appearance of) mischievous agency and disobedient energy. However, while

4 Wells sourced this quotation from a 1992 BBC broadcast, *The Magic Art of Jan Švankmajer*.

Švankmajer planned subversively to release objects from their servitude as markers of bourgeois normality by puppetising them, that surrealist project is increasingly softened by Bárta and Svěrák, who reduce it to an allegory whereby toy societies act as parallels to our own. Their lost toys are disordered by breaks in the routines of their ascribed roles, and it is in their attempts at restoring themselves to order that the films invite reflection upon the nature of social roles and the possibility of functioning outside of their limits.

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## Summary

This essay explores the meanings and identities of toys and puppets in three Czech feature films, which collectively cover a range of animation techniques (constituting a new definition of what it means to 'play' with these toys). Jiří Barta's *Na půdě aneb Kdo má dneska narozeniny* (*In the Attic: Who Has a Birthday Today?*, 2009), Jan Svěrák's *Kuky se vrací* (*Kooky*, 2010), and Jan Švankmajer's *Něco z Alenky* (*Alice*, 1988) all build allegorical significance from tales in which toys take on independent lives, but are always framed through their relationships to children. Each film explores the afterlife of discarded or neglected toys, dolls, and puppets, a visual representation of the imaginative investment and cultural import given to these otherwise immobile things. All three directors use toys and puppets as markers of the passing of childhood, and as compendia of cultural memory, but with different degrees of political intent and social critique.

## Keywords

Czech animation, Czech film, Jiří Barta, Jan Svěrák, Jan Švankmajer, puppets, toys, film theory

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Forgotten Toyhood

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