

The Walking Abyss: Perspectives on Contemporary Czech and Slovak Surrealism¹

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As a member of the contemporary Czech and Slovak surrealist group I am surrounded daily by surrealist history and collectivity, and yet it is not my aim here to discuss either the history or the collective nature of Czech surrealist activity. What I wish to talk about is the question of the ideology of surrealism in Czechia and Slovakia today. I do not know in fact if the word ideology has any special connotations in English. In Czech it has. In Czech, when you say *ideology*, everybody gets ready to listen to *propaganda*. However, I would prefer to speak about ideology in all its complexity. The group of Czech and Slovak surrealists always contained a number of well-known names within its borders. After Štyrský, Toyen, Medek etc., the most well known member of the current group is, of course, Jan Švankmajer. I do not wish to promote a personality cult, but nonetheless will focus my paper around a discussion of Jan Švankmajer, to show that it is not only the monsters in his films that are frightening, but also his points of view. He is not the sole focus of my paper, however.

In general, one point is typical of surrealism as a living movement, and has been very often latent, even hidden, if you only look at the results of surrealist creativity. The Czech theoretician of surrealism, Vratislav Effenberger, who was an active member of the surrealist movement from the end of World War II until his death in 1986, used to warn people who were interested in it about the approach of most theorists and historians of art. Effenberger would point out that, in their eyes, *great surrealist art* ought to be separated from *sectarian surrealist orthodoxy*. As a representative of this 'orthodoxy,' I would like to shed some light on this point. The collaborative activity of the surrealist movement is, for me, not based on a kind of orthodoxy, rather on a shared conviction that human integrity is neither based on *isolated* ideological action nor on *isolated* creative expression. Creativity and analysis, and desire and protest, that is to say unregulated thought and critical consciousness: these mutually *contradictory* phenomena are continuously understood within their analogical and, at the same time, dialectical *unity* by surrealists.



During the opening of one surrealist exhibition, Eva Svankmajerová declared: 'Now we are standing here, and our creativity is hanging on the walls around us. It could also be the opposite! We for instance could hang there and our creativity could stand before us. But fortunately everything is in order, and we stand here, *nature itself*.'² As this rather drastic observation about the possibility of an exchange between creator and creation suggests, surrealist creativity does not represent art in any normal sense. For surrealism, art is not really the intention but rather the tool, the instrument and the device. The intention is the development of the imaginative abilities of the human being. As many of you will know, surrealists often take a stand against 'Art.' And yet, on the other hand, one of the most well known characteristics of surrealism is the complexity of its artworks! Evidently there is a problem here. Surrealists do not necessarily criticise art itself, but rather its retreat from any high, magical sense of maintaining life in its integrity. While previously it retreated into the role of an ideological and propagandist support tool for ruling societies, it has now taken on the role of a form of entertainment. Surrealists emphasise the fact that this retreat has not been brought about by chance, but by the logical development of modern consumerist society: a society that does not openly dictate this retreat, but implicitly supports it through nonviolent pressure. This has forced art today into the exclusive task of filling people's leisure time, of entertaining people, and of bridging the gap between the working processes of yesterday and tomorrow. The basic tool for this suppression of the meaning of art in consumerist societies is the art trade. We can see that artists willingly defer to the demands of such an art trade – at least since Andy Warhol's time. To be more precise, this art trade has been conspicuous since the end of the Second World War. It is evident that the capitalist ruling powers learned a lot from that war, especially from both the achievements and errors of the propaganda tools used by totalitarian empires in unleashing it. After this lesson, capitalist powers vertiginously modernized the propagandist tools they used to control society, and the art trade has been one of the basic channels of transmission for the nonrepressive, 'soft', yet emphatic seepage of social, as well as individual, resistance to the ruling economical-political powers.

The atmosphere in the Czech republic, as you know, has entailed a heightened sense of this dynamic of power due to 40 years of Communist oppression and reaction, and so we can use this specific example to show how the mechanisms of influence work in general. Many young Czech artists who openly disdain their fathers' generation for collaborating with the communist



regime never seem to observe that the market is also ideological – indeed, it is the ideology of today's establishment! And so – as Jan Švankmajer has observed – they do not understand that when they create a TV advert for Coca-Cola or washing powder, they in fact enter into the same kind of collaboration with power as their fathers did when making agitprop in honour of the congress of the Communist party in Czechoslovakia. Here, political liberation works very much in the same way as the performance of a medieval jester, while the real power, profiting from this kind of postmodern clownery, holds its armoured positions more firmly than ever before.

I apologise for this ideological propaganda. Don't worry, it's over now. To be honest, I simply wanted to use this opportunity to show the dialectics of creativity and critical consciousness, as I mentioned at the beginning. And so, what about surrealist art? Does it demonstrate surrealist political views? No, it does not in fact! The French surrealist poet, Benjamin Péret, emphasized that poetic activity cannot enter into any political conflict; it must draw upon its own tools, its own cultural influences. When a surrealist painter makes something that looks like agitprop or at least like a kind of surrealist advertisement for Coca-Cola, to do so is already to bring about the destruction of a specific freedom of human thought and imagination. On this issue, Effenberger observed the following:

A poet in fact is not a representative of what should be, he is not and cannot be a model either in his passions, in his liberty or in his hardship. Let him, then, at least be the walking abyss, the underground passages in which we can hear real steps. Let him be at least a laugh that wakes us up from a dulling sleep, if we are about to meet that which we love and which resists being devoured.³

And so, according to the surrealist point of view, there is a kind of subversive power in the imagination. Such a power does not come from any orthodox doctrine, but from the inner necessity of a reaction to living antagonisms present in any one life and in any one social situation. It also does not matter if such subversion manifests itself visibly, or if it is present in a creation as a lusty weather-blown gust of undirected imagination. An authentic poem, as Péret emphasized, demonstrates indivisible and active liberty, even if it is not written in a particular political or social context. And we can add, moreover, that it is particularly when not used as a propaganda tool, that surrealist creativity can help the process of liberating human thought, and to make this thought independent of the apparently non-ideological ideology of the market, for instance.



Maybe now we can gain a better understanding of surrealist proclamations. The time of surrealist support for a Marxist revolution in the Leninist guise of bolshevism has passed. Does it mean that the surrealists gave up on the idea of changing the world and life? I think not. To be honest I believe the opposite is true. Today, the ideas of the Czech and Slovak surrealists go beyond certain political doctrines and debates within the existing conglomeration of positivist rationalism and new-ageist irrationality. In fact, surrealists withhold and refuse the principles of civilisation as it exists *as a whole*. As Švankmajer says: 'Repression is not the invention of a totalitarian system: it is a tax which mankind pays for civilisation.'⁴

The expansion of the surrealist critique of 'atlantic civilisation' as a whole was the work of Vratislav Effenberger. His critique of contemporary society focused on the question of the formalisation of function. According to him:

The monopolising formalisation of information, education, culture, art, sports, housing, transport, hygiene, morals, justice, nourishment, eroticism and sexuality, fashion, and public service, in short of all ways in which human life manifests itself, is the inner sign of the end of this civilisation, in which *form has devoured function*.⁵

Formalisation is the fundamental target of surrealist critique. And this not only applies to its external battles, so to speak, but to the dangers of formalisation inside surrealism itself. We know that every movement with a long history must be wary of this danger in order not to give way to petrification. I would like to give an example of how surrealists have positioned themselves in order to go beyond their own history. The original French surrealists of the 1920s railed against western civilisation with their provocative text addressed to the Dalai Lama, in which they wrote: 'Teach us, Lama, the material levitation of bodies, teach us how to free ourselves from the grip of the earth.'⁶ Sixty-five years later, Eva Švankmajerová wrote a second letter to the Dalai Lama, in which she stated with appalling realism: 'So you're proposing that we all push our legs behind our necks for fun, so that we can radiate an innocent, or even simple-minded joy. You trickster!'⁷ This arsenal with its power to dethrone was then aimed at the world, which Eva Švankmajerová held under her hypnotic spell. She used a gesture that not only went against civilisation; for a while in fact she sided directly with nature against the human, commenting on the destructive power of flooding, from the point of view of water: 'Human beings, for instance, put books in water's way, and dam it up with the modern



bastardised architecture we call buildings, as well as with certain second-rate sculptures and the living models for them.⁸

Such a far-reaching refusal of anthropocentrism is not just some kind of allegiance to art-for-art's sake. Far from it. In fact it opens the way for rediscovering a similar conception of reality to that on which the thought of aboriginal cultures has always been based. A commentary like this can provide an analogy for the surrealist solution to the crisis of civilisation: by returning to the atmosphere of the magical societies of prehistoric times. As Švankmajer has said:

To go back to nature! And to do so, mankind would have to give up some of civilisation's 'achievements': technology will be for nothing, science again will revert to magic, and art will come down from the pedestal of aesthetics and the gilded haunts of mass entertainment, and will return to where it originally came from: to practical life, as a tool of everyday rituals and the expressive medium of myth.⁹

It might be appropriate to cite here the striking statement by a famous interpreter of aboriginal thought, Claude Lévi-Strauss, in which he summarised civilisation's progress: 'The only thing that I hope for, is that by the time humans have colonised other planets, vast stretches of our planet will have been abandoned and so will return to a savage state.'¹⁰

It was undoubtedly as part of this anti-crusade that in the 1970s Švankmajer invented his tactile experimentation. According to him: 'in the renaissance of the general impoverishment of sensibility in our civilisation, touch must play an important part, because tactilism has not yet been abused by the realm of art.'¹¹ Hence his creation of an art appealing to the senses in their original state. Švankmajer - whose obsession with tactility is evident even in the medium of film, where the structures of filmed objects are revealed in detail - believes that things which people often used to touch are charged by emotive states of mind, and by the stress or euphoria of such touches. He says that his films are in fact listening to the utterances of things that look dead but are not dead. Švankmajer shows by this that he is serious about questions of aboriginality. Moreover, he accepts not just ordinary forms of perception but also 'primitive' mental dynamics, whose basic function is magic. Švankmajer believes that magic and art were one in the past, but that art was later aestheticised, and that through this aestheticisation art managed to cut the branch on which it was sitting.



As an example of how imaginative- and in some sense magical- thinking can enforce itself in particular circumstances, we can consider the way in which Švankmajer explains the function of a surrealist ceramic dish that he created together with his wife: 'For instance from the shape of a plate we can derive many associations. By inference, the process of feeding can be heavily erotised or become a cannibalistic-aggressive act, releasing accumulated misanthropic feelings, etc.'¹² In any case, Švankmajer concludes, the process of feeding will become ludic and will no longer simply be the process of filling a belly. We can see here that magic does not have any of the sense of tightrope display or trickery, rather that it works in a practical, therapeutic way: as a function of integral psychology. The inspiration Švankmajer derives from the experience of aboriginal thinking goes so far as to cast him in the role of a fetishist – in the original meaning of the term. He creates real fetishes - in the form of golem-like monsters - which represent a psychical asylum against the pogroms of reality. And he enters into contracts with such monsters. However, as a surrealist, he has sufficient armoury in store for use against all varieties of non-critical apotheosis, and so he concludes: 'Well, if a fetish does not come up to our expectations, and does not adhere to a contract, we can punish it: cut it into pieces, splinter it, burn it, bury it.'¹³

With such conviction in the omnipotence of the imagination, based on the satisfying of desires that often have an evidently infantile character, we cannot avoid the accusation that it is nothing other than perversion. But the surrealist is already prepared to counter this, by demanding that the reality principle gives up its throne to the pleasure principle. According to Švankmajer, these two principles - of reality and of pleasure - 'have the same relationship to each other as a dog to a cat, water to fire, repression to liberty.'¹⁴ The Czech surrealist writer and psychoanalyst Zbyněk Havlíček asserted that surrealist poetry openly identifies itself with unconscious desires – i.e. with the pleasure principle – and so in fact is a form of 'polymorphous perversion.' We need to ask ourselves, then, whether such perversion is not dangerous for society. We are familiar, for example, with the monsters in Švankmajer's films and his natural history mystifications, which allegedly pay homage to the practice of the mad Doctor Moreau in H.G. Wells' famous science fiction novel. The hero of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* – Doctor Moreau himself – asserts: 'I wanted to find the ultimate limits of living form.' And he was successful in creating monsters using his surgical experience: the horse-rhinocerus, the pig-hyena, and the man-dog, for example. Eva Švankmajerová, on the other hand, without any hesitation, took man and put him into the position



of Botticelli's Venus in one of her pictures. In another, we can see naked men sitting with well-dressed women having breakfast on the grass. This is not too far removed from the perverse fantasies of the pagan Marquis de Sade, who in his *Juliette* allowed a man to dress as a woman and marry another man dressed as man, and then let the first man dress like man and get married to a man dressed as a woman, and let a woman dress as a man, and so on. This Caligulan enthronement of 'new' relations among people, this connecting of incongruous objects, and this deviation from the normal intentions of things and thoughts, is not led by a desire for 'truth' (from the point of view of the reality principle), but directly by the need to put all human inventions at the service of the pleasure principle. In addition, the feeling of being a puppet-master (in fact Švankmajer was a puppeteer) - the feeling of absolute dominance over the destinies of characters which he now manipulates, immediately, without the slow-paced conquering ability of real, 'normal' power - is also part of this magical activity. Švankmajer has openly confessed that the uncontested and judgement-resistant nature of the puppet-master's acts has satisfied his necrophilic tendencies.

And so the travesty of perversion leads here even to necrophilia. This is perhaps a step too far. But, if we look harder, can we not ask whether contemporary civilisation - against which surrealists revolt through a magical and creative rebellion - is affected by a much more dangerous perversion? The inadvertent infantilism of this civilisation, obscured by the fog of media propaganda, ends - as we know very well - in indiscriminate murderous madness in all corners of the globe, and, in fact, few people actually complain about this typically aggressive, seriously destructive and bestially triumphant regression. Instead of this, the surrealist creator - proceeding via the route of magical and infantile obsessive destruction - reaches a state of dialectical regression. The satisfaction achieved by analogy can be seen as merely an illusory satisfaction. But in fact this illusory satisfaction frees him from that neurotic need for direct identification with the patterns, figures and ideals of civilisation, an identification that feeds into the never-ending turnover of civilisation's aggressivity.

And so we have a conflict on our hands, but it is not the kind of conflict we might expect. It is not the classical, abstract opposition of normality and perversion. No, thanks to surrealist intervention we face a different opposition which runs transversally to this one: between the reality principle - with its egoistical irresponsibility - and the pleasure principle, with its will to authentic



human integrity. The contradiction between civilisation and barbarity has been resolved by surrealists in a way that runs completely contrary to that adopted by the majority of society. Plus and minus signs trade places in a significantly 'perverted' way, while barbarity – in its surrealist interpretation – has more curt elegance than civilisation, and also demonstrates more accurate foresight. So, the curtain lifts: the barbaric gentility of surrealism is not dependent on interpretation, does not make any compromises and does not produce any political messages however attractive such messages might look. No, do not forget that in fact surrealism is nothing else but the walking abyss.

¹ This article is the edited transcript of a communication presented at the University of Essex in September 2004.

² Eva Švankmajerová, 'Příroda se nemýlí' ('Nature is not mistaken'), *Analogon* 36, 2002, 100.

³ Vratislav Effenberger, *Realita a poesie (Reality and poetry)*, Prague 1969, 301.

⁴ Jan Švankmajer, 'Vzdát se vedoucí role' ('Giving up a leading role'), *Analogon* 2, 1990, 76.

⁵ Effenberger, 'Cesta surrealismu k nové civilizaci' ('Surrealism's journey towards a new civilisation'), *Analogon* 2, 1990, 78.

⁶ 'Adresse au Dalai-Lama,' *La Révolution surréaliste* (3, 1925), Paris 1975, 17.

⁷ Švankmajerová, 'Druhý dopis Dalajlámovi' ('Second letter to the Dalai-Lama'), *Analogon* 2, 1990, 92.

⁸ Švankmajerová, 'Příroda se nemýlí,' 100.

⁹ Švankmajer, 'Vzdát se vedoucí role,' 76.

¹⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'Interview with Claude Courtot,' *L'Archibras* 3, 1968.

¹¹ Švankmajer, *Anima, animus, animace (Anima, animus, animation)*, Prague 1998, 74.

¹² Švankmajer, 'Magie předmětů' ('The magic of objects'), *Analogon* 7, 1992, 49.

¹³ Švankmajerová, Švankmajer, *Jídlo (Food)*, Prague: Prague Castle Riding Hall 2004, np.

¹⁴ Švankmajer, 'Komentář ke Spiklencům slasti' ('Commentary to *Conspirators of Pleasure*'), in *Síla imaginace (The power of the imagination)*, Prague: Dauphin-Mladá fronta 2001, 198.

Bruno Solarik was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia on 20th March, 1968, and works as a translator, editor and curator, as well as writing poetry and theory and making photographic work. He studied linguistics and history at Masaryk University, Brno, and is a member of the current group of Czech and Slovak Surrealists. He has co-organised around 20 exhibitions of the Czech and Slovak surrealist group in Czechia and abroad since 1994, including the major international surrealist show *Sacrilege* (Prague 1999), as well as curating many individual exhibitions, for instance Jan and Eva Svankmayer's *Food* (Prague, 2004). He served as the editor of the surrealist journal *Intervence* (1995-96); and since 1997 has been co-editor of the journal *Analogon* (surrealism, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and 'transversal' sciences). His theatrical collaborations include, since 1992, 'HaDivadlo' (Brno), and 'Comedy Theatre' (Prague), and adaptations of Melville and Maturin, as well as original sketches for the surrealist cabaret 'The Coiners - Analogon Evenings' in the Comedy Theatre in Prague (together with David Jarab and Frantisek Dryje). He has worked for Czech TV (documentaries on Karel Teige, Vratislav Effenberger, and the Analogon Evenings), and took part in Jan Svankmayer's 'Lunacy' project. His poetry has been included in several anthologies



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