

Hmyz/Insect

Directed by Jan Švankmajer

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The opening to Jan Švankmajer's *Insect* (*Hmyz*, 2018) sets up the theme of the overlap between the filmic narrative, that of a group of amateur actors putting on an adaptation of Karel and Josef Čapek's 1920s play *Pictures From the Insects' Life* (*Ze života hmyzu*, 1922), with the filming of *Hmyz* itself. An ageing man, Borovička (Jiří Lábus), rushes out of an apartment building in Prague wearing a dung beetle costume and carrying a script. The actor clumsily knocks into passers-by in the street before the shot cuts to him running with the film crew in view. The initial overlap between the film and its paratext is linked when one of the crew members mirrors Borovička's clumsiness and dramatically tumbles in the street. After other members of the cast of the amateur play are introduced on screen, the opening sequence abruptly cuts to a shot of Švankmajer himself, giving an apparently unscripted, interview-style

address to the camera about the nature of the film.

Švankmajer's signature stop-motion animations are renowned internationally, especially in *Alice* (*Něco z Alenky*, 1988) and *Faust* (*Lekce Faust*, 1994). Born in Prague in 1934, Švankmajer studied at arts college before enrolling in the department of puppetry at Prague Academy of Performing Arts. His move into filmmaking came relatively late, at the age of 31, when he debuted with *The Last Trick* (*Poslední trik pana Schwarcewalldea a pana Edgara*, 1964), an animated short film that combined puppetry and stop-motion and whose opening sequence also displayed the cast and crew behind the scenes preparing for the production. Indeed, Švankmajer marks this connection in his opening monologue in *Insect*. He says: 'I direct it like an animated film or puppet theatre; as if the actors had wires attached to the head

and strings on the arms’.

The metafictional dimension of the director coming on stage in *Insect* anchors Švankmajer’s surrealist work in the real, lived world in a manner that still raises doubts about the veracity of the real as presented here: did the crew member in the opening sequence of *Insect* mean to fall over? Is Švankmajer reciting a script in his opening address to the camera? Do the crew members in the background know that they are being filmed? Are they all acting as extras in this scene?

These questions generate a blurring of the lines between the real and the overtly fictional on screen in a manner which calls into question our own sense of the ontology of the real world surrounding us. Particularly when we consider the role of the director in the film: if the proprietor of the work is presented as a kind of mock-puppet, whose words, actions and gestures are being manipulated from above, then who is in control of the narrative before us? It should also be considered that the critics’ response to the film after its screening at the Rotterdam Film Festival in 2018 was fairly tepid: for Jordan Mintzer of the *Hollywood Reporter*, the film’s ‘zaniness’ is ‘exhausting’, and its enduring quality is that it is made by the great filmmaker Švankmajer (February 2, 2018). Likewise, Jay Weissberg of *Variety* somewhat reluctantly describes the film as a ‘disappointment’ while maintaining that Švankmajer remains a ‘key proponent of surrealist cinema’ (February 2, 2018). Meanwhile, Wendy Ide of *Screen Daily* laments that the film is unlikely to attract new audiences to Švankmajer’s work (January 28, 2018). Thus, Švankmajer and his methods

(which are both conveniently on show in *Insect*) are the real star attraction in the film. This could still be a self-aware device employed by Švankmajer in response to both the political and filmmaking culture he was operating in.

Keeping Švankmajer’s background in puppetry in mind, there is more to it than meets the eye when the director places himself in this film. The *mise-en-abyme* effect of a film narrative about the production of a play is placed inside the even larger Russian doll of Švankmajer himself. However, the uncanny effect of puppets mimicking the appearance and behaviour of humans is ironically reflected in the imagery of the actors mimicking the insects they are supposed to be portraying in their play. Švankmajer somewhat tellingly describes the play as a socio-political satire in his opening address, which self-reflexively describes the film as well. In a work where some higher power, namely the film director, continually interjects and corrects the work of the fictional director of the play (Jaromír Dulava), this acts as a commentary on the role of a film director -such as Švankmajer himself- within the commercialised film industry. The significance of the funding of the film project comes into play here. Despite being a luminary of Czech and Slovak cinema for over six decades, Švankmajer was forced to source part of the funding for his film from a crowdfunding enterprise, Indiegogo, which contributed significantly to the project’s 40 million CZK budget (around £1.3 million). In an industry largely reliant on commercial profits, Švankmajer’s dependence on a loyal fanbase to source funding is a worrying indictment. Indeed, as Ide suggests, this facet may provide

a barrier to theatrical distribution given that many of those helping the crowdfunding campaign receive a copy of the film (January 28, 2018), thus further marginalising the work in a commercial sense.

Švankmajer's somewhat hyperbolic warning in his prologue to the film, that the brothers Čapek foretold the rise of the Nazis in the 1920s, is again a telling reference point. If Švankmajer is pointing to some underlying, malignant force loitering in the wings here, it is to the denigration of both the production of theatrical performances as well as that of the performances of leading politicians. There is something darker inherent in the comic tone of the film. That the theatrical performance is being put on by a bunch of hapless amateurs, to whom the insects are merely an abstract idea, offers a thinly veiled criticism of the wider political situation. Haphazardly dressed as insects, none of them seem to have any notion of what being an insect involves: indeed, the director continually reminds them of the insect they are playing, imploring them to act like their designated critter. Both Borovička and Jitka (Ivana Uhlířová), who plays the larva in the play, witness the insects coming to life. Thus, the unseen, malignant force manifests itself to some characters, and the seemingly benign develops into a greater obstacle for the individuals who witness them.

In a world increasingly dominated by populist demagogues, the ironic warning this film offers is perhaps that once-great powers, like Švankmajer himself, are waning to the point of mediocrity, but that bigger, malignant forces are lurking in the background: the greedy,

profit-driven film industry and the similarly motivated political class. *Insect*, then, can be viewed as the desperate attempt of an artistic master to pass on the skills necessary to break through the mediocrity that surrounds him. If the critical reception to the film is anything to go by, however, there is still a long way to go.

Filmography

–*Alice (Něco z Alenky)*, 1988), [film] dir. by Jan Švankmajer (Czechoslovakia/Switzerland/Great Britain/West Germany: Film Four International/Condor Films; distributed by First Run Features, 1988).

–*Faust (Lekce Faust)*, 1994), [film] dir. by Jan Švankmajer (Czech Republic/France/Great Britain: Pandora Cinema, 1994).

–*The Last Trick (Poslední trik pana Schwarcewalldea a pana Edgara)*, 1964) [film] dir. by Jan Švankmajer (Prague: Krátký Film Praha; distributed by BFI Video, 2007).

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