

**Attention,
rehearsal in progress!**

People are pigs.

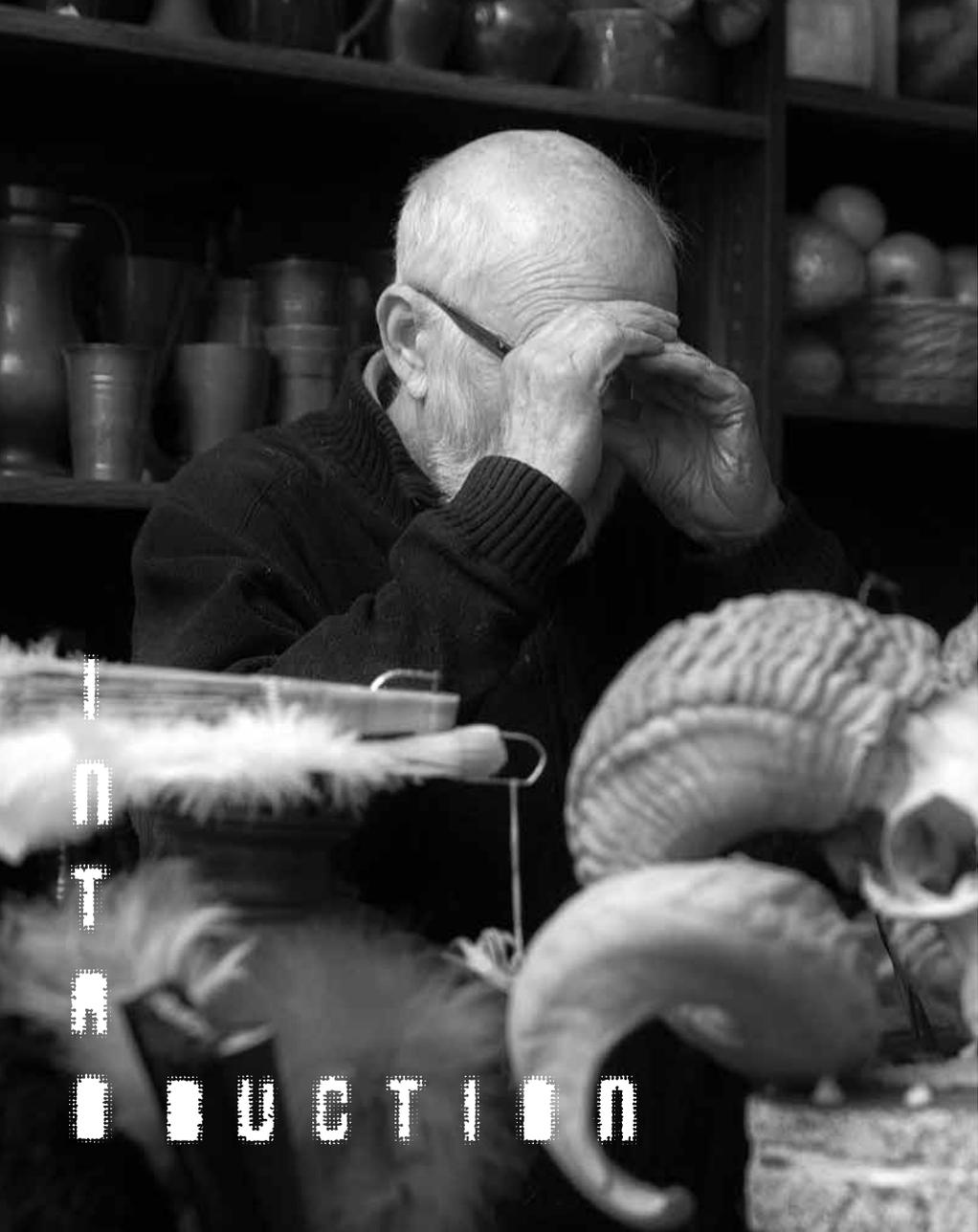
Are you edible?

Who thought it up?

The Čapek brothers' drama *The Insect Play* is a misanthropic work. My screenplay only extends this misanthropy, with man being more like an insect and our civilization more like that of an anthill. One should also remember the message behind Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.

Jan Švankmajer





I N T R O D U C T I O N

Introduction

Is Optimism Anachronistic?

Jan Švankmajer's most recent film *Insects* (*Hmyz*) in some sense completes the cycle of his ventures into feature film, which began with his highly individual interpretations of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (*Alice/Něco z Alenky*, 1987), the Faust myth (*Faust/Lekce Faust*, 1994) and others. In this respect, Švankmajer's films may be categorized into two groups: films based on an original story – i.e. the majority of his short films, *Conspirators of Pleasure* (*Spiklenci slasti*, 1996), *Surviving Life* (*Přežit svůj život*, 2010) and others, and films in which Švankmajer, starting with the script phase, reflects on and interprets specific works of literature, or selected motifs derived from them: *The Fall of the House of Usher* (*Zánik domu Usherů*, 1980), *The Pit, the Pendulum and Hope* (*Kyvadlo jáma a naděje*, 1983), *Little Otik* (*Otesánek*, 2000), etc. Here it should nonetheless be stressed that the films falling in the latter category, *Insects* among them, cannot be ranked within the genre of film adaptations in the usual sense – they are always highly interpretative and creative works, in which there is no ambition to either illustrate or in any way recount or update the literary work they are based on, instead using and misusing the original contents and meanings to achieve a highly original and personal artistic statement.

In this context, *Insects* is surely among his most sophisticated films, as the structure or layered topology of its storyline, form and content is based on several heterogeneous, although mutually intersecting and juxtaposed planes: the fragments of “live action” amateur performance of several motifs drawn from the Čapek brothers' canonical drama *The Insect Play* (*Ze života hmyzu*, 1922), the hint of the director's transposition of the distinctly satirical allegories of the dramatis personae into the “real” characters of the amateur actors, presented in several storyline and situational peripeties during their theatre rehearsals, as well as Švankmajer's typical animation sequences that run through both of the previously mentioned narrative planes, heightening their message to the level of an aggressive and enigmatically grotesque parable.

Throughout the film, these three stylistic and semantic levels of meaning and style are torpedoed as it were from the sidelines by the interspersing of alienating footage from the parallel production of the “making of” documentary, which reveal the backstage reality of the scenes that have just played: the technical aspects of

Introduction

filmmaking, directing and so forth. All this produces a sort of cinematic assemblage, or montage of heterogeneous planes, a dynamic structure which significantly contributes to the rhythm of the film, and the evocation of the general atmosphere of an often idiosyncratic unsettling of the viewer's expectations. This alienating intersection of reality and fiction, of the real and the imaginary, is rather symptomatic and characteristic of Švankmajer's films since roughly the early 1970s, *The Ossuary* (*Kostnice*, 1970), *Leonardo's Diary* (*Leonardův deník*, 1972), etc., although it had appeared as a compositional side-element already before – for example in the form of the confrontation of the filmic adaptation of the cinema of masks and the reverse side of theatrical sets in the film *A Quiet Week in a House* (*Tichý týden v domě*, 1969). In the present film, however, the device is emphasized and deliberately over-exposed, and the traditional illusion of film narration permanently demolished, bringing to the surface segments of “raw reality”, which in undisguised contact with the fictional elements may and very often are meant to paradoxically amplify the metaphorical meaning and critical effect of the conceptual framework of the film as a whole. All of these levels of meaning and style thus organically, of their own will, interconnect and converge into a compulsively sarcastic assault on the historical, or even ultimately civilizational, optimism implied in the so-called rational development of our notoriously best of all conceivable worlds. Futility is unmasked through purely imaginative means and devices, revealing the dark or simply banal underside of contemporary history.

Whether or not the viewer accepts this interpretation of artistic intent can remain as a possible point of departure for further analysis, which will doubtless come into conflict not only with an active version of the now-predominant historical skepticism, but ultimately also with the increasingly obvious and ever stronger position of unselfconscious optimism, as a rather untenable anachronism of thought. An anachronism of Western civilization. Jan Švankmajer's *Insects* broach questions of precisely this nature.

František Dryje

Introduction





Introduction by Jan Švankmajer

It is common practice for the authors of books to write forewords to their stories. This is not in order to explain to slow-witted readers the message of their work, but to provide them with a clue how to read their books. Whether seated with a cup of coffee, on a beach under a parasol, or crouched underneath the blankets with a flashlight. Sometimes the foreword also illuminates of how the work was created. Why would this not be possible also for a film?

Introduction to the film *Insects*

The Čapek brothers wrote their drama *The Insect Play* (*Ze života hmyzu*) in 1924. At that point, Adolf Hitler was still drinking beer in a cellar in Munich, busy crossing out Jewish ancestors from his family tree. And Djughashvili was taking over Lenin's legacy, in order to presently turn it into one big gulag. Back then the play was therefore not yet intended as political satire. It was pure juvenile misanthropy. Little surprise then, that the Czech flag-wavers, who had not yet sobered up from their recently-won independence, came down on the Čapek brothers like a ton of bricks, accusing them of misguided pessimism. And the young brothers gave in and added an optimistic ending to their play: "Oh, what a beautiful day," the day that gave birth to chickenshit self-censorship, which would in later years produce monstrous blossoms in the Czech Lands and which would become a Czech national emblem.

But this is not what my film is about. What is it about, then? I have no idea. I simply wrote the screenplay, as it came out of me, in one go, as with automatic writing. Without any rational or moral control. It is only in this way that you manage to avoid the messianic temptation of the Great Artists to improve, redeem, edify and warn mankind. That just can't be done. Read Freud. The only meaningful and adequate answer to the cruelty of life is the cynicism of the imagination, as one Czech poet maudit would say.

Jan Švankmajer
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TREATMENT