

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 6. 11. 2024

# Alice

„The history is rather complicated and a lot of things we did weren't in accordance with the law or the then prevailing film monopoly,“ begins Jaromír Kallista his story about he and Jan Švankmajer used funds from foreign investors to make their surrealist horror *Alice* (Něco z Alenky, 1988) in Socialist Czechoslovakia.<sup>[1]</sup>

Švankmajer finished his first film *The Last Trick of Mr. Schwarcewallda and Mr. Edgar* (Poslední trik pana Schwarcewallda a pana Edgara, 1964) in 1964. It was some 12 minutes long. In the following decades, when he became a renowned artist both home as well as abroad, Švankmajer stuck to the short film format.

But when the time finally had finally come for Švankmajer to make his first feature film, in which he planned to make good use of all his imaginative and directorial methods along with his interest in the work of Lewis Carroll, it turned out that the aforementioned renown didn't guarantee the support of Czechoslovak State Film. And outside of the state monopoly, it was nearly impossible to secure a professional film production. Nearly. Švankmajer drew inspiration from Carroll for his short film *Jabberwocky* (Žvahlav aneb Šatičky Slaměného Huberta, 1971). The impulse to make the film came from reading the nonsensical poem Jabberwocky from Carrolls's second "Alice" book *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* and the fairy-tale book for children *Annie the Elf and Straw Hubert* (Anička skřítek a Slaměný Hubert) by Vítězslav Nezval (who was also inspired by Carroll). As a direct precursor of Švankmajer's feature debut can be considered the cellar horror *Down to the Cellar* (Do pivnice, 1988) in which a little girl has to undergo a traumatising descent into dark underground in order to fetch some potatoes.

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was one of the most important books of Švankmajer's childhood. But unlike other authors, he didn't interpret it as a fairy-tale, but rather as a dream. His Alice was supposed to be a tribute to the writer's imagination and a Freudian record of this dream. Švankmajer's and Carroll's Alice walk

through a dream world whose spacetime isn't constructed by logically interconnected images but deformed in accordance with the heroine's dreamy subjective fantasies. It's her fantasy that animates inanimate objects and dares us to close our eyes if we want to see something. It's her voice that is heard when other characters are speaking.

The imaginative capabilities of dreaming are enhanced by the technique of pixilation which brings to life a stuffed white rabbit and other props and puppets. Many objects appear already in the opening scenes set in Alice's room when she's awake. After releasing the undercurrents of the subconscious, they acquire different meaning and reveal the wondrous landscape behind/above reality. When Alice drinks from the bottle labelled „drink me,“ she not only shrinks but also turns into a porcelain doll as disturbing as other inhabitants of Švankmajer's magical and terrifying universe.

Just like in Carroll's work, causality is replaced by parallelism and repeating motifs. But Švankmajer didn't strive to make a faithful adaptation. He chose passages that made an impression on him and then plays with them. Instead of transferring themes into film, he engages in a dialogue with them. Carroll's text intertwines with Švankmajer's memories of childhood, a time when we don't fully understand the world but are tempted to explore it using our smell, sight, hearing, taste and touch. While Carroll used consumption as one of many motifs of his fantastic story, for Švankmajer – just like in his other films – eating and drinking is the basis of the heroine's transformative experience. The tactile nature of the film also helps to evoke the childhood experience and takes us back to the infantile exploration of reality.

For Švankmajer, the most important parts of living and artificial bodies are their mouths and eyes whose function he highlights with sound effects. After all, he chose Kristýna Kohoutová from hundreds of candidates to portray Alice for her eyes. The detailed shots of Alice's mouth, however, belong to a different child actress...

In any case, the casting of the leading role was one of the easy phases of development, which, according to Kallista, began in 1983. When French magazine *Positif* asked Švankmajer two years later whether he was planning to make a feature film, his response was that he was working on a script of his personal interpretation of *Alice in Wonderland*.<sup>[2]</sup>

For the reasons outlined above, the preparation phase took a long time. During the era of normalisation, short films were normally produced by the Krátký film studio, but Švankmajer and Kallista were unsuccessful when asking for their support. They turned to Art Centrum, a company focusing on exporting and trading art, which was the only company that had an exception and was able to participate in foreign co-productions. Its employee Eva Heigelová arranged a contact with British producer Keith Griffiths. In an interview with Petr Bilík, Kallista explains that officially, they couldn't ask for foreign co-production partners for a feature. They therefore decided to claim that they were preparing an audiovisual exhibition inspired by Lewis Carroll with some film elements.

Griffiths was able to get the support of British Channel 4 (its film division Film Four International) and after that, Czech native Michael Havas working for Swiss company Condor Films joined the project. The company became the main partner and so Switzerland was the main producer behind *Alice*. The remaining part of the funds was provided by West German TV channel Hessischer Rundfunk, but on the condition that in addition to the feature film, Švankmajer will also make a six-episode television series.

After deducting the share of all investors and purchasing film stock, the production was left with approx. 200 000 marks. The money was used to pay the crew members, make props, develop the negative and sound post-production so everything had to be very economical. The filming itself took place in 1987 in a cramped studio in Nerudova street, in a former bakery, where all props and decorations were set up. The crew also used the attic, the basement, yard and corridors. Švankmajer consulted all special effects with cinematographer Svatopluk Malý.

In his memoirs, Malý recalls that due to the semi-legal private production, they couldn't get professional cameras from the State Film. But they managed to get an old camera named Šlechtovka (after inventor and cinematographer Josef Šlechta) which they modified. Through various contacts they also managed to obtain spare parts, lenses, Eastman Kodak negative made in France and a wooden flatbed editor Moviola from the 1930s.

It was out of the question that the daily approval sessions of a film made outside official institution took place in a screening hall designated for that purpose. The

crew therefore refurbished an old Ernemann projector and screened the footage on a whitewashed wall in the studio. They couldn't send the negatives to the State Film laboratories for development so they sent them to Art Centrum. For the final development, they eventually used Tanus Film laboratories in Wiesbaden.

Despite complicated funding and various strategies to keep the production a secret, Kallista recalls the mood was good and the team worked perfectly. Švankmajer himself was director and graphic designer. His wife Eva designed the props and costumes. Ivo Špajl a Robert Jansa were in charge of sound design. Bedřich Glaser was the animator, puppets and props of various sizes were made by Jiří Bláha and the film was edited by Marie Zemanová.

Although the production wasn't under the supervision of the censorship committee, Švankmajer had to defend his vision to investors. The Swiss producer called for shortening of some sequences. The opening sequences in Alice's room seemed long and unattractive for ordinary viewers. Švankmajer's reaction was rather resolute: „The argument that television viewers are pampered and start flipping through channels if there isn't something attractive at the very beginning, is purely commercial and as far as I know, it was clear at the very beginning of our collaboration that *Alice* wouldn't be what you call a commercial film.“<sup>[3]</sup>

Švankmajer eventually won and the film more or less corresponding to his vision was premiered at the 1988 Berlinale. In August 1988, it was screened the USA. A year later, *Alice* won the feature film award at the Annecy Animated Film Festival. Whereas in Czechoslovakia, the only people who saw the films were those who were invited or wandered into the screening hall in Kostelec nad Černými lesy, the birthplace of Eva Švankmajerová, foreign press reviews described *Alice* as a spectacular film with captivating animation. The first Czech private film production since the nationalisation of Czechoslovak film industry (or the second, if we count the originally private production of Zdenek Zaoral's *The Cobweb* [Pavučina, 1988]) had its official Czechoslovak premiere on 1<sup>st</sup> November in a time when it wasn't necessary to have Švankmajer's imagination in order to imagine a Czech production funded by foreign money.

---

**Alice** (Něco z Alenky, Switzerland, West Germany, Great Britain, 1988), director and script: Jan Švankmajer, cinematography: Svatopluk Malý, editing: Marie Zemanová, cast: Kristýna Kohoutová. Condor Films, Channel Four Films, Hessischer Rundfunk, 86 min.

---

### **Literature:**

Alice in Czechoslovakia. *Sight and Sound* 35, 1987, no. 2, p. 124.

Petr Bilík, *Filmař Jaromír Kallista*. Prague: Akademie múzických umění, 2019.

Petr Král, Questions à Jan Svankmajer. *Positif*, č. 297, 1985, pp. 38–43.

Svatopluk Malý, *V zajetí filmu. Vzpomínky kameramana*. Prague: NFA 2008.

Jan Švankmajer, *Možnosti dialogu: mezi filmem a volnou tvorbou*. Řevnice: Arbor 2012.

Jan Švankmajer, *Síla imaginace*. Prague: Dauphin 2001.

---

### **Notes:**

[1] Petr Bilík, *Filmař Jaromír Kallista*. Praha: Akademie múzických umění 2019, p. 111.

[2] Petr Král, Questions à Jan Svankmajer. *Positif*, č. 297, 1985, p. 42.

[3] Jan Švankmajer, *Síla imaginace*. Prague: Dauphin 2001, p. 267.