



STOP MOTION: CELEBRATING HANDMADE ANIMATION ON THE BIG SCREEN

Alice

Alice

Directed by: Jan Svankmajer

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A Condor Features production

In association with: Film Four International,
Hessischer Rundfunk

Executive Producers: Keith Griffiths, Michael Havas

Producer: Peter-Christian Fueter

Associate Producers: Hannes Bressler,
Paul Madden

Production Manager: Jaromír Kallista

Production Supervisor: Eva Heiglová

Post-production Supervisors: Rüdiger Findeisen,
Danielle Josefowitz

With the collaboration of: Nikolka Kreková,
Karolina Glaserová, Terežka Chudobová,
Ivona Krehová, Vasek Svankmajer

Scripted by: Jan Svankmajer

Inspired by the novel by: Lewis Carroll

Director of Photography: Svatopluk Malý

Assistant Camera: Martin Procházka

Animator: Bedrich Glaser

Editor: Marie Zemanová

Designed by: Jan Svankmajer

Art Direction: Eva Svankmerová, Jirí Bláha

Sound: Ivo Spalj, Robert Jansa

English Language Supervisors: Larry Sider,
Heather Morley

Translations: Alice Turner, Gerry Turner

Cast:

Kristyna Kohoutova (Alice)

Switzerland-UK-West Germany 1988©

84 mins

Digital

Although a declared admirer of Lewis Carroll as the inadvertent pioneer of surrealism, Jan Svankmajer firmly tells the *Alice* story his own way, much as one would expect. Like an extended reconstruction of *Down to the Cellar*, it follows the nightmarish journey undertaken by a small girl through a maze of subterranean vaults alive with the menace of the unforeseen and the abnormal, the difference in this case being that since the encounters have been dreamed up almost deliberately by Alice herself, she greets them not as tremulous victim but as a relatively placid observer. Blue-eyed and blonde as – largely thanks to Tenniel – Alice is conventionally expected to be (despite the raven hair and dark eyes of the Dodgson photographs), Svankmajer's heroine has all the composure necessary for one who is to engage in existential debate on equal terms with the heraldic beasts and petulant royalty awaiting her just beyond the nursery walls, and her adventure begins, as tradition and history require, alongside murmuring water on a sleepy summer afternoon.

With an early warning signal, Svankmajer promptly halts this pre-credit sequence and transposes his heroine to the confinement of an over-furnished interior (rather as if she has been shut away as a punishment) where two large dolls restage the lifelessness of the opening scene and Alice, reclining in boredom, waits for the White Rabbit to lead the way to a wider range of possibilities. His startling disappearance into the drawer of a simple square table standing in a ploughed field, followed in turn by Alice, indicates so inventive a departure from the familiar that it comes as something of a surprise to find Svankmajer subsequently staging various Wonderland incidents quite faithfully. He has dispensed with the Gryphon, the Mock Turtle, the Dodo, Father William, the Duchess and, sadly, the Cheshire Cat, but so many authentic allusions remain that one has the unsettling sense of watching an old and well-remembered dream in a new and disturbing state of hallucination.

Consistent with the passionless cruelty of Svankmajer's habitual universe, where the masks, models and relics of humanity clutch and consume each other in imperturbable rivalry, Alice's explorations are under constant attack, which she repels with equal ruthlessness, literally knocking the stuffing out of her opponents. And when the creatures ignore her to go their own ways, following a private logic, they are like Svankmajer's Dormouse which, erupting from a teapot, looks more like an emaciated fox as it scours the tablecloth before returning to its lair, or his frog footman who, message received, whacks its way around the fly-blown crockery with a vast, obscene tongue, or his Caterpillar, an animated sock with the eyeballs and teeth of a Buñuelian horse, which sews together its eyelids when it wants to sleep. Presiding over this unholy zoo, the White Rabbit, wild and sinister, is no longer guide but mastermind, marking the passage of time like a liturgical countdown to some unspeakable act of infamy.

Svankmajer has pruned the story to give the Rabbit the dominant role as Alice's duellist, replacing the Duchess in the bedlam of the kitchen, and assuming the duties of Executioner as the Queen (an oddly subdued piece of artwork) orders the terminal holocaust. 'My Alice,' says Svankmajer, 'is an interpretation of Carroll's, fermented by my own childhood with all its particular obsessions and anxieties.' Where Carroll attributes the inspiration for Alice's dream to the reassuringly rustic sounds of the countryside, Svankmajer anticipates the images of her fantasy in the brooding preliminary shots of her room, with its shelves of relics and mysteries from other, previous lives – the furniture she has not yet earned the right to use. A sewing basket, an array of jars, some lace, some pictures, the display cases of butterflies and beetles, a mousetrap on the floor – this random miscellany reflects a domestic routine in which the child is still a recent interloper, by no means certain of integration.

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Dougal and the Blue Cat Pollux et le chat bleu
Sun 1 Sep 12:10; Sun 15 Sep 15:20

Alice

Wed 4 Sep 18:10; Sat 21 Sep 15:10

Little Otik

Wed 4 Sep 20:15 + intro by musician and Starve
Acre composer Matthew Herbert; Sat 21 Sep 17:45

21 Years of dwarf studios

Sun 6 Oct 15:30

Coraline

Sun 8 Sep 12:00

King Kong

Sun 8 Sep 13:00 + intro by Douglas Weir, Content
Remastering Lead

James and the Giant Peach

Sat 7 Sep 12:10; Sat 21 Sep 12:00

The Pied Piper Krysar

Sat 7 Sep 18:40; Sun 22 Sep 15:00

Anomalisa

Sat 7 Sep 20:40; Wed 2 Oct 18:30

King Kong

Sun 8 Sep 13:00 + intro by Douglas Weir, Content
Remastering Lead; Mon 16 Sep 2045

Mighty Joe Young

Sun 8 Sep 15:45; Wed 18 Sep 20:55

Mary and Max

Wed 11 Sep 18:00; Wed 25 Sep 20:35

ParaNorman

Sat 14 Sep 12:20

Marcel the Shell with Shoes On

Sat 14 Sep 15:40; Sun 6 Oct 12:20

My Life as a Courgette Ma vie de Courgette +

Manipulation

Sun 15 Sep 12:20; Tue 8 Oct 18:40

Library Talk: A Study in Stop Motion

Mon 16 Sep 18:30

Stop-Motion Masters + Q&A with Barry Purves, Suzie Templeton and Osbert Parker

Fri 20 Sep 18:10

Chuck Steel: Night of the Trampires + Q&A with director Mike Mort

Fri 20 Sep 20:30

The Boxrolls

Sun 22 Sep 12:00

Kubo and the Two Strings

Sat 28 Sep 11:40

Wendell and Wild

Sun 29 Sep 15:10; Mon 7 Oct 20:40

Missing Link

Sat 5 Oct 12:00

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Alice's odyssey, in this sense, is a hunt for her own context, and her frequent calls to the Rabbit – 'Oh sir, please wait!' – are a plea for time (which for him, as for most adults, is in short supply) to be given for explanation and involvement. The peculiar antagonism between past and present is an obsession that certainly links Svankmajer with Carroll, whose Alice vigorously engages in a war of wits with her elders. But in common with so many of the East European animators and experimentalists (links with Lenica and Borowczyk are frequently obvious), and particularly with the Czech tradition of surrealism dating back to the 16th-century Mannerists, Svankmajer finds images more eloquent than words, and materials – especially bone and wood – more substantial than any vocabulary. When his heroine lifts a scoop of jam from a passing jar only to find she's about to consume a drawing pin, or when a crispy bread roll suddenly sprouts an evil thatch of nails, an indescribable malevolence is articulated.

In Svankmajer, as in Carroll, a baby becomes a pig, playing-card characters come to cut-out life, and Alice is perpetually changing size as an expression of both her physical and emotional condition. But on film, the metamorphosis theme provides the excuse for some exuberant additional improvisations. Most vivid of these is the wriggling menagerie of socks, looping their way through neat holes in the floorboards with an enjoyment so seductive that Alice's own stockings fight their way off her feet to join them and have to be sternly hauled back. For his first feature-length film, Svankmajer's humour has been interestingly tested: at times it goes freewheeling off, one bizarre joke after another (although often cued by Carroll), like the wild inventiveness of the Hatter's tea party, in which an endless series of watches is swathed in butter. In other respects, the gags are ritualistic, firmly repeated until the sense of fun has been diluted into a kind of fatalism: every time the Rabbit consults his watch he has to brush sawdust off it, every time Alice pulls at the knob of a table drawer it comes away in her hand and she falls over, and every time a conversation is reported there is a close-up of Alice's lips emphasising that this is her narrative.

Despite the predictable array of supernatural detail with which he embroiders the story – the flying bird-skulls (at one point chillingly shown emerging from their eggs), the scuttling chunk of red meat, the Rabbit's army of skeletal cohorts – the most significant of Svankmajer's variations on the Carroll theme is his introduction of a scholastic element. The ubiquitous table, with its capacious drawer of unlimited stimuli, is both surrealist symbol and mundane school desk, fully equipped with instruments of instruction (as well as of construction and destruction). Forcing the drawer open time and again, Alice obstinately and against all odds acquires new experience and knowledge (she even swallows the bottle of ink) until, exercise book in hand, she undergoes the final examination.

This educational process, of course, turns out to have been a fraud – it has failed to illuminate the secrets she is pursuing (two of the film's most constant images are of the lightbulb by which Alice tries to dispel the darkness and of her feet stretching on tiptoe as she cranes to see more clearly). When she realises at her 'trial' that she is only allowed to say what she is supposed to say, that any divergence from the incomprehensible adult text causes general panic, she quickly detaches herself from this collapsing environment. The political message, complete with beheadings, is remarkably clear – in fact, it makes more sense than Svankmajer's insistence that his film is 'a pure example of an infantile dream'. But the ending, with Alice waiting to snip off the head of her treacherous 'teacher', is also balefully personal: she is now free from the tyranny of her elders, but the only power this realisation has given her is the power of destruction. Svankmajer's final image is of Alice's anticipatory smile, undoubtedly mirroring his own. He has fathered another fine delinquent.

Philip Strick, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, November 1988