The Fetishism of Meaning: Disavowal in Kafka, Švankmajer and the Quay Brothers

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Abstract

According to Freud, fetishism is based on disavowal (*Verleugnung*): the possibility of believing two contradictory propositions to be true simultaneously. This thesis argues that the structure of the sign and of meaning more generally can be understood to function in exactly this way. The sign both is and is not that which it represents. Disavowal offers a theoretical explanation of the functioning of language, meaning and text based on a principle of the simultaneous existence of two contradictory propositions.

The fetish is aligned with a series of concepts which, it is argued, have a similar contradictory structure: Sigmund Freud's *unheimlich*, Tzvetan Todorov's fantastic, Slavoj Žižek's real (incorporating Jacques Lacan's *objet petit a* and Alfred Hitchcock's McGuffin), Jacques Derrida's *différance* and Ferdinand de Saussure's sign. Theoretical underpinnings come from psychoanalysis, anthropology and Marxism. There is a consideration of the history of fetishism in philosophy and in film theory. Following the work of Derrida in *Glas*, an argument is made for the radical potential of the "generalised fetish", defined by disavowal.

The thesis explores the action of fetishism in writing and film. Hair is used as one example of a symbolic object to show that an understanding of such a symbol is based on disavowal. The concept of fetishism is then used to explore the way in which the object is represented in the writings of Franz Kafka and the films of Jan Švankmajer and the Brothers Quay. These works provide complex representations of objects on a thematic level while the texts themselves function as just such fetish objects on a formal level. It is the self-reflexive interaction between these two levels that makes these texts exemplary.

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Contents

Statement

Chapter 4, "Deformity and Fetishism in Kafka's Writing", has previously been submitted as part of the coursework for the qualification of the MA in Literary Studies at the University of Cape Town. The piece here is a revised and updated version.

Section 5.1 "*Flora* and Architorture" has previously appeared in print as "Architorture: Jan Švankmajer and Surrealist Film" in *Screening the City*. Eds. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (Verso: London, 2003: pp. 100-112).

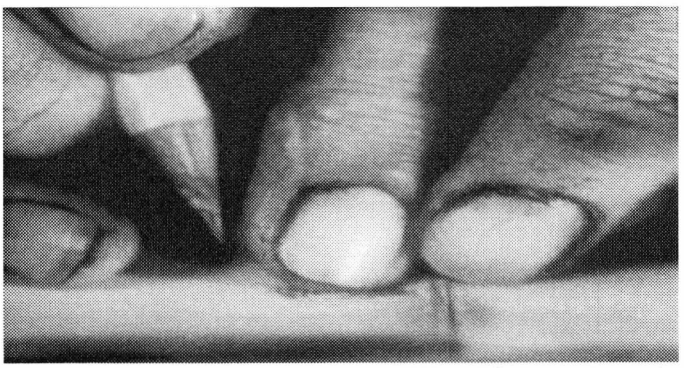
Truly, is there anything the world hath to show more asinine than a footwear fetish? (Will Self)

It now seems clear that when all is called into doubt no assertion can be made; yet the process of doubt, uttered by the doubter, remains on the page. We read, so to speak, a sequence of sentences that have been scored through: they form no statement because they have been cancelled, yet we read them all the same. (J.M. Coetzee)

The pupils, my friends, are scattered in all kinds of jobs. And if I am smashed to pieces and go to ruin, what is being smashed and ruined? A zero. The individual me is only a zero. But now I'll throw away my pen! Away with the life of thought! I don't want to think of anything more now. (Robert Walser)

Cui servire regnare est (University of Kent at Canterbury)

"Stop interpreting everything!" said K. (Franz Kafka)



(Brothers Quay)

Chapter 1: Introduction

> It is perhaps unavoidable that, when a subject confronts the factitiousness of object relations, when he stands at the place of the want that founds it, the fetish becomes a life preserver, temporary and slippery, but nonetheless indispensable. But is not language our ultimate and inseparable fetish? And language, precisely, is based on fetishist denial [disavowal] […] and defines us in our essence as speaking beings. Because of its founding status, the fetishism of "language" is perhaps the only one that is unanalyzable. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 37)

Fetishism is often understood to be a personal, psychological peccadillo that, depending on circumstances, is either viewed by others as perverse or as legitimate sexual expression. Such an understanding of fetishism merely describes a small part of a much broader system. Following on from Kristeva's insight, this thesis argues that the structure of fetishism, as laid out by Sigmund Freud, is the fundamental structure of the semiotic world. This argument takes Freud's formulation of disavowal (*Verleugnung*) - the possibility of simultaneously holding two contradictory notions - as the necessary structure which allows for the existence of the sign. It is precisely the "unanalyzable" fetish of language that this thesis seeks to analyse.

When we encounter an object that appears to have meaning - be it film, book, picture, sculpture or even word - we understand that the object represents, or signifies, something else. The object is itself not identical to this other meaning but allows us access to it in some way. This thesis argues that when we perceive meaning we are involved in holding two contradictory propositions to be true at the same time:

1. The object is different from its meaning
2. The object is the same as its meaning

We understand that the signifier is not the same as the

signified (so that we can think about the world), but we also think that the signifier is the signified (so that we can act in the world).

This thesis uses the term fetishism to describe both the way in which meaning is understood, and the way in which meaning is produced. In his description of how the structure of fetishism is based on the ability to hold two conflicting ideas simultaneously, Sigmund Freud offers us a way of describing the functioning of meaning. Freud calls this contradictory mode disavowal (*Verleugnung*).

Fetishism has been the subject of much scholarly discourse. The most fertile approaches have come from psychoanalysis, Marxism and anthropology, which will provide the primary frameworks for discussion of fetishism in this thesis. There are a number of other discourses surrounding the subject, in particular the psychological (where it is treated as a pathology, although this is often also true of psychoanalysis), the pornographic and the cultural. This last category contains any number of further orientations, including a strongly feminist position (often within a psychoanalytic framework) and those within certain contemporary academic disciplines, such as media and film studies.[1]

The thesis explores the twin concepts of fetishism and disavowal as they appear in multiple manifestations in theory, fiction and film. In chapter 2 of the thesis, I consider the anthropological approach and link this to Freud's formulation of disavowal in his discussions of fetishism. In Chapter 3, I examine the symbol theory of C.

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[1] A broad cultural analysis approach is taken in the edited collections of Browne (1982) and Apter and Pietz (1993). See also Bourdieu (1988), Gathercole (1989), Steele (1996) and Ko (2003). In film studies, Harris's *The Film Fetish* (1992), Allen's *Projecting Illusion* (1995, pp. 143-154) and Mulvey's *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996) deal with the subject most fully. For a critique of Mulvey see Sorfa (2001). See also Silverman (1988), Dadoun (1989), Cagle (1994), Williamson (1996) and Williams (2000).

S. Peirce and develop it through the critique offered by Ogden and Richards in *The Meaning of Meaning*. Using hair as an example, I compare and contrast the anthropological and psychoanalytic discourses surrounding the symbol and provide detailed analyses of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* and Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*.

In Chapter 4, I examine the way in which Franz Kafka presents deformity as a simultaneously repulsive and attractive element in his letters, diaries and *The Trial* and discuss how this is another case of disavowal. In Chapter 5, I begin by examining Jan Švankmajer's use of sound in some of his short films and argue that it functions in the space of disavowal. I provide readings of Karl Marx's approach to commodity fetishism and relate this to Ferdinand de Saussure's discussion of the sign in terms of value and meaning. I also introduce the critiques of Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek. This discussion of the object is used to analyse a number of films by the Czech Surrealist filmmaker, Jan Švankmajer.

Jan Švankmajer's films have often been noted for their explicit discourse on (and through) the object.[2] Jan Uhde lists "bones, shells, fruit, tools, refuse, scrap, and so on" (Uhde, 1989, p. 197) as typical of the materials that Švankmajer uses in his films. In addition, Švankmajer is particularly concerned with the status of the film itself as an object. His use of fast montage as a "fantastic kinetic collage" in many of his films (a technique also used by Vera Chytilová in *Sedmikrasky* (*Daisies*, 1966)) is almost a parody of animation and his terse editing style

[2] Although I do not specifically discuss Švankmajer within the context of the surrealist approach to the object, such a context is provided by Finkelstein's *Surrealism and the Crisis of the Object* (1979), Malt's very recent *Obscure Objects of Desire: Surrealism, Fetishism, and Politics* (2004) and also in Švankmajer's own *Hmat a imaginace* [*Touch and Imagination*] (1994).

highlights the object-ness of his films.[3] Švankmajer's work, both in film and in other media, will be discussed both as analysis, or interpretation, of the role of the object as well as the way in which the media themselves are implicated in this analysis by their very status as objects. It should be pointed out from the beginning that Švankmajer appears not to offer much in the way of hope in this discussion:

> Anticipated deliverance proves to be an illusion, or a trick. The hero's tribulations and all of his efforts are pointless, as he is moving in circles drawn by others – if by anyone at all. (Uhde, 1989, p. 199)[4]

However, the argument of this chapter will be that it is through humour that Švankmajer manages to find his way out of this labyrinth of nihilism.

Švankmajer's use of objects within his films has clear links to the concept of fetishism. He often alludes to the secret life of the object and to the sense that objects, which have been used before and are now somewhat outmoded, retain some vestige of this past life. In *Compulsive Beauty* (1993), Hal Foster points out that the surrealist fascination with the past is one that is both "critical and comedic". He writes:

> Thus if surrealism repeats images of the nineteenth century, it is to work through them as ciphers of repressed moments: to complete them precisely so that they can be broken with, so that the twentieth century can be awoken from the dream of the nineteenth century (or, as Benjamin says, its spell cast by the commodity) into a transformed twentieth century. In this way the surrealist repetition of historical representations is both critical and comedic. (p. 168)

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[3] His use of quickly inter-cut extreme close-ups is particularly distinctive and "aggressive" (Uhde, 1989, p. 202).

[4] "Such dramatic cyclicity, which is an expression of Švankmajer's pessimism, can be found in his work quite often (e.g., *Down to the Cellar*, *Possibilities of Dialogue*, and *Et Cetera*). In *Et Cetera* (1996), cyclicity constitutes the story itself" (Uhde, 1989, p. 199).

Švankmajer's films present battered and crumbling objects as both a sad commentary on the loss of value in contemporary life and a celebration of the aesthetics of such decay. Not only do his films explore the ways in which objects contain an inner life or meaning, which allies them with a certain "linguistic" fetishism, but his animated objects are closely linked to erotic desire, thus making explicit the sexual charge attributed to the fetish by Freud. In addition to this, Švankmajer's work is particularly involved with an exploration of the uncanny (clearly evident in his taste for adapting gothic tales) and I will argue that the structures of fetishism and the uncanny are remarkably similar, if not identical in that they are descriptions of the same movement from the unconscious to the conscious.

It is the uncanny that Hal Foster sees as being central to an understanding of the surrealist project as it highlights "a concern with events in which repressed material returns in ways that disrupt unitary identity, aesthetic norms, and social order" (Foster, 1993, p. xvii). He claims that the surrealists:

> remain drawn to [the uncanny's] manifestations, indeed to any reappearance of repressed material. This is the basis of surrealist connections between symbols and symptoms, beauty and hysteria, critical interpretations and paranoic projections. It is also the link that connects the early experiments in automatic writing, dream recitals, and mediumistic sessions to the later involvements in hysteria, fetishism, and paranoia. (Foster, 1993, p. xviii)

The link between fetishism and the uncanny is constantly explored in Švankmajer's films and other artefacts and it is this link that will be central to my reading of these films.

Finally in Chapter 6, I consider the relationship between the uncanny and the fetish in some films of the Brothers Quay as well as their relationship to the authors Bruno

Schulz and Robert Walser. Here I also discuss the problem of the hermeneutic circle and the possibility of a private symbol.

While Švankmajer's films are very simply shot and it is this simplicity, or naivety, that foregrounds the constructed nature of his films, the Quay films use elaborate optical illusions, stylised camera movements and a distinctive shifting of tight focus to constantly keep the object of the film itself at the forefront of the viewer's attention. This forced consideration of the process of viewing, is combined on a thematic level with an obsessive interest in the texture of objects. Just as these objects are then animated on film, so the film is highlighted as an animated object. While the objects within the film function as fetishes (they appear to contain some other meaning), the film itself operates in exactly the same way (it also appears to mean something else than that which it shows). It is this double movement from thematic fetish to formal fetish that is of particular interest in the work of the Quays. There is a self-reflexivity which enables the process of disavowal to be more easily discussed than in other fictional works. This is a short-circuit of a normally hidden process. By feeding back disavowal (at the level of theme) into a further disavowal (at the level of form) the procedure of meaning-making is laid bare. Apart from considering a number of the films in detail and discussing their relationship with some of the texts to which they are relates, I also analyse in detail one particular critical reading of the Quays in order to show the difficulty that critics have in reading these films.

Throughout these investigations, I argue that the fetish structure of disavowal functions in a similar way to the logic of a number of other concepts. These include: Freud's own formulation of the uncanny; Tzvetan Todorov's related notion of the fantastic; Slavoj Žižek's conception of the

real (as a development of his thinking on Jacques Lacan's *objet petit a* and Alfred Hitchcock's McGuffin); and most particularly Jacques Derrida's *différance*, which, like the fetish, is neither a word nor a concept, but the possibility of both.

Chapter 2

The Fetishism of Meaning: "A mark that takes on the force of sign"

Fetishism is a way of explaining meaning, if we understand meaning to be the relationship of one thing to another. In this introductory chapter I will present an examination of Freud's 1927 article "Fetishism" and other related writings by him on the subject. I argue that the structure that Freud places at the centre of fetishism, disavowal (*Verleugnung*), is fundamental to an analysis of meaning more broadly. I then go on to discuss the anthropological approach to fetishism, especially as presented by Roy Ellen. I will argue that disavowal and fetishism can account for both the structure and the origin of the sign. I will conclude that fetishism does not describe an amusing sexual peccadillo but is rather the fundamental structure of meaning and therefore that reality is a fetish. The fetish is neither revolutionary nor reactionary, it merely is.[5]

2.1 Histories of Fetishism

Fetishism as a concept is often understood through three different disciplines: anthropology, Marxism and psychoanalysis (or psychology, more broadly). In their book on *Female Fetishism*, Gamman and Makinen (1994) discuss these methodologies under the headings of anthropological fetishism (p. 16), commodity fetishism (p. 28) and sexual

[5] This position is in contradiction of the celebratory one proposed by Emily Apter in the introduction to her and William Pietz's *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse* where fetishism and disavowal are seen as in some way intrinsically progressive: "Part of what has motivated this project this project of "fetishism as cultural discourse" is the desire (albeit utopian) to invent a politically implicated language of cultural interpretation that somehow desublimates the inherent voyeurism of the critic's fixative stare" (1993, p.8). A similar position to Apter is taken by Krips (1999, pp. 3-4).

fetishism (p. 37). They explain that in anthropology fetishism is understood as the discourse of colonialism surrounding the encounter with non-Western religions since the 16th century. The origin of the word is thought to be from the Portuguese "feitico" which itself looks back to the Latin "facticius": artifice (from facere: to make). The fetish is thus in the first instance a *created* object, whether by god or man. The specific history of the use of the word during the period of European expansion and its application by anthropologists (and many others) has been extensively documented by William Pietz in three articles entitled "The Problem of the Fetish" I, II and IIIa (1985; 1987; 1988). John Mack provides an accessible discussion of Central African *Minkondi* (statuettes hammered with nails) in terms of their relation to the spiritual other world and argues suggestively that:

> What we see on the surface of the object, and what is so absurdly misrepresented in the lingering discussion of "fetish", is a stage in a whole series of on-going transactions between the living and the dead, assembled, contained in one powerful image. The driving in of the nails is not, then, a casual act of magical fantasy but a dramatic, presumptive and inherently dangerous act which pierces the surface that lies between the two domains. (Mack, 1995, p.62)

However, in terms of presenting the most cogent explanation of the way in which fetishism is understood by anthropologists, Roy Ellen's "Fetishism" (1988) is perhaps the most useful, and in some ways the most radical.

Like Gamman and Makinen, Ellen begins by charting the "three principal analytic traditions – anthropological, Marxist and psychological" (1988, p. 213). He describes the anthropological position thus:

> But although anthropologists spent much effort criticising the misuse of the term "fetishism" amongst others, they were, all the time missing one of the main features of objects described in this

> way, namely that there tends to be an inner ambivalence as to whether it is the objects themselves which effect material changes in some mysterious way, or whether it is some spiritual force which is either represented by or located in (but separate from) those objects. (Ellen, 1988, p.215)

This is a fundamental observation since the religious fetish object in anthropological discourse can be seen as either being the conduit of a spiritual power, or being the source of that power itself. Mack, cited above, sees the hammering of nails into the figure as an expression of this ambivalence – the nail both pierces the powerful object itself and also allows a communication between one space and another. Nevertheless, Ellen notes that anthropologists began to shy away from the term since it was so imprecise and was being used to describe any number of differing practices. Pool, for instance argues:

> that the term is a source of confusion and does not contribute to our understanding of the phenomena it is applied to, and that it should therefore be abolished. (1990, p.114)

Ellen, however, provides this concise summary of the way in which the three approaches define fetishism:

1. Anthropological (specifically, intellectualist-evolutionist): in which an object is believed to be a spiritual force in itself: the result of malthought;
2. Marxist: in which an object takes on a fixed quality that conceals its true economic function: the result of mystification;
3. Psychological: in which a part (or an associated artefact) replaces the whole as an object of – usually sexual – desire: the result of repression or "disavowal". (1988, p.128)

He then writes that his own interest in fetishism stems from the fact that "it is a concept which enables us to focus our attention on the articulation of individual cognitive processes and the structure of collective representations" (Ellen, 1988, p.219) and he goes on to isolate four "underlying cognitive processes":

1. a concrete existence or the concretisation of abstractions;
2. the attribution of qualities of living organisms, often (though not exclusively) human;
3. conflation of signifier and signified;
4. an ambiguous relationship between control of the object by people and of people by object. (1988, p.219)

Of these four process it is the third, the conflation of signifier and signified, that is most of interest here. Ellen expands on this idea:

> Many of those things which have been conventionally labelled as fetishes are, to a degree, representations which have become signifieds and causative agents in their own right, not merely because they convey or stand for some other meaning. (1988, p.226)

The representation that has been imbued with the power of the real is, I would argue, not one element among four, but is rather defines the structure of fetishism as a whole. He then traces the way in which this process may take place by hypothesizing a system which begins with the "reification" of "natural and social things" ("an abstraction conceptualised as a thing"), followed by "iconification" ("an abstraction represented as a material thing"), then "animation" ("conflation of signifier with signified") and, finally ending, less certainly, with the process of "fetishisation", which results in "cognitive ambiguities arising from animation" (Ellen, 1988, p. 231). In considering the diagram that Ellen provides of this process [fig. 1], it should be noted that the structure he indicates is provisionally circular: as the system moves towards fetishisation, it seems inescapable to conclude that the fetish is the origin of the structure itself. Ellen, using dotted lines to indicate a certain lack of certainty in such a closed system, is not entirely happy with this conclusion (private conversation), even though he concludes that

> Fetishes cannot be treated as a special type of object, defined in terms of physical appearance or in terms of generic functional attributes; neither is fetishism a particular kind of mental condition (but rather an aspect of all thought)" (Ellen, 1988, p.232).

Ellen thus concludes that if fetishism is the model for signification, then it must be the model of thought itself. This will be a conclusion that I will seek to explore through psychoanalysis, rather than anthropology or Marxism.

In the next section I will go on to explore the implications of Gamman and Makinen's conclusion that:

> [We have shown that] what the different types of fetishism have in *common* is a process of *disavowal*. In different ways, and as a consequence of different psychic or structural mechanisms, objects in our culture take on meanings that connect them to, or stand in for, other meanings and associations: but the connection is lost or partially denied as a consequence of the fetishism. (1994, p. 44)

I argue that this connection is always already lost and that this is a necessary loss if what we choose to call reality is to be recognised.

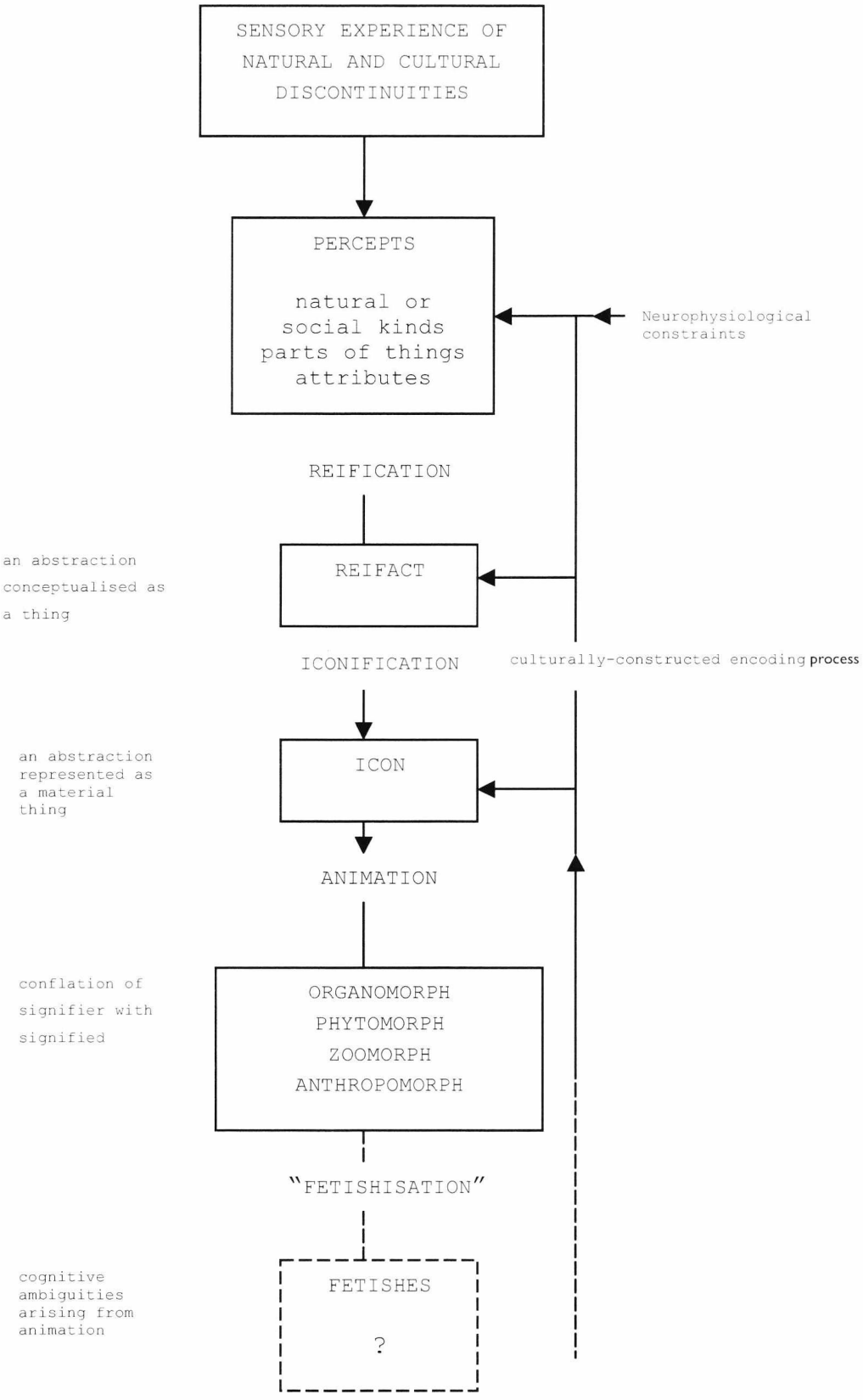

Figure 1: Cognitive processes underlying "fetishisation" (Ellen, 1988, p.231)

2.2 Freud and Fetishism

Freud's discussions of fetishism range from their early introduction in the first of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), "The Sexual Aberrations", followed by a brief mention in *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's "Gradiva"* (1907), through his presentation of "On the Genesis of Fetishism" to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1909, to a passing comment in *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* (1910), a paper on foot fetishism in 1914 and finally culminating in his 1927 essay, "Fetishism", which most cogently sums up his position on the matter.[6] I will here give a brief overview of the way in which Freud's thinking about fetishism developed, with particular reference to the 1909 paper (which is least discussed in the secondary literature on fetishism) and to the 1927 explication. I will concentrate in this analysis on the process of disavowal (*Verleugnung*).

In *The Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud heads a section: "Unsuitable Substitutes for the Sexual Object – Fetishism" (1991b, p. 65) and makes clear that fetishism is a deviation of the sexual object rather than one of sexual aim, a distinction he makes at the beginning of the essay on sexual aberrations: "Let us call the person from whom sexual attraction proceeds the *sexual object* and the act towards which the instinct tends the *sexual aim*" (1991b, pp. 45-46). He explains that the sexual aim is:

> regarded as being the union of the genitals in the act known as copulation, which leads to a release of the sexual tension and a temporary extinction of the sexual instinct – a satisfaction analogous to the sating of hunger. (1991b, p. 61)

Thus we can understand that the sexual object excites desire, while the sexual aim is to dissipate that

[6] This is not an exhaustive list of every mention of fetishism in Freud's work, but covers adequately the development of his thinking. Rose provides a full list of such references in his translation of Freud's Vienna paper (1988, pp. 165-166).

excitement. Oddly, Freud places his discussion of fetishism within the section dealing with the sexual aim rather than the sexual object, but says that he has waited until this moment, having dealt with the sexual object in the preceding section, so that "we could become acquainted with the factor of sexual overvaluation, on which these phenomena, being connected with an abandonment of the sexual aim, are dependent" (1991b, p. 65). The fetish is not only an aberration of the sexual object (that which excites desire, properly a member of the opposite sex) but also one of aim (the extinction of sexual tension). In this sense the fetish is an exemplary aberration since it breaks the norms of both aim and object.

Freud explains that, to some extent, fetishism is allied to normal sexual attraction since both fetishistic desire and non-pathological desire involve "the psychologically essential overvaluation of the sexual object" (1991b, p. 66) and that therefore a "certain degree of fetishism is thus habitually present in normal love" (p. 66). It is of interest to note here that it would seem that "normal love" is in fact merely a subsection of fetishism (rather than the other way around), since fetishism would appear to be the logic of love itself, i.e. the relationship of sexual object to sexual aim must be a fetishistic one, no matter what that object or aim might be.

Fetishism (or, as Freud puts it, the "situation" (p. 66)) only becomes pathological when the fetish "actually *takes the place* of the normal aim and, further, when the fetish becomes detached from a particular individual and becomes the *sole* sexual object" (p. 67: emphasis in original). While it is clear that Freud is desperately trying to maintain the normality of the heterosexual encounter and the overvaluation of the fetish *object* is an obvious marker of fetishism, what is of interest is that the fetish object also becomes the sexual *aim*. The implication of this is that the individual fetishist's desire must be constant

since the object and the aim are the same thing. The fetishist can never successfully achieve his or her aim without destroying the object of desire and to destroy the object would mean that the aim remains unfulfilled. The fetishist is caught in an exquisitely resonating double bind. It is this double bind, or rather, the structure of the double bind, which appears here in a rather obscure form, that emerges later as disavowal.

Following Binet, Freud makes the prosaic analysis that the fetish is "an after-effect of some sexual impression, received as a rule in early childhood" (1991b, p. 67).[7] In many ways this is an unsatisfactory explanation since it presupposes the existence of sexual pleasure as existing before the mechanism that allows sexual pleasure to be recognised as such. In a footnote added to the text in 1920, Freud explains that all examples of the initial event "have recorded a first meeting with the fetish at which it already aroused sexual interest without there being anything in the accompanying circumstances to explain the fact" (1991b, fn. 1, p. 67). He continues:

> The true explanation is that behind the first recollection of the fetish's appearance there lies a submerged and forgotten phase of sexual development. The fetish, like a "screen-memory", represents this phase and is thus a remnant and precipitate of it. (Freud, 1991b, fn. 1, p. 67)

Less convincingly he adds that the "direction of fetishism, as well as the choice of fetish itself, are constitutionally determined" (fn. 1, p. 67). Whereas the fetish was seen before as being the result of some accidental occurrence during childhood, Freud now seems to

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[7] "Alfred Binet (1867-1911) wrote 'Le fétichisme dans l'amour', first published in *Revue philosphique* in 1887 (Vol. 24, July-December, pp. 143-167, 252-274) and republished with minor revisions in his *Études de psychologie expérimentale* in 1888 (Paris: O. Doin). Binet argued that fetishism originated in an observation or event which occurred during an moment of sexual excitation, usually during sexual awakening in childhood. In later life the association between the impression and the excitation reasserted itself" (Rose,1988, fn. 4, p. 150).

think that there is an innate predilection towards fetishism (the reason for this being unclear, and resembling Krafft-Ebing's use of the notion of family taintedness or "an inherited diseased condition of the central nervous system" to explain sexual aberrations (1965, p. 32)). However, in a footnote on foot fetishism added earlier in 1910, he writes that "the foot represents a woman's penis, the absence of which is deeply felt" (Freud, fn. 1, p. 68). This formulation will become central to fetishism in 1927.

In his 1909 paper before the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, "On the Genesis of Fetishism", Freud quickly summarises Binet and Ebing and points to the problematic supposition that, to follow Ebing, would mean to imagine "that this person [the fetishist] was of a pathological disposition" but that this is not a satisfactory explanation and Freud sees this "puzzling sexual constitution" as the rock "upon which the entire 'psychopathia sexualis' is built"; and upon which the theory founders (Rose, 1988, p. 152). Freud finds two "mechanisms" at the centre of discussions of fetishism: "1) the infantile factor, and 2) the factor of reminiscence". The first imagines the formation of the fetish at some crucial stage of the young child's growing experience, while the second he sees as a "prerequisite for love" which is based either on conscious "reminiscences of beloved persons," or "when repression comes into play, the opposite." Freud suggests that the term "fetish" be used only for those cases that involve repression, which indicates that the "prerequisite" remains "puzzling" (Rose, 1988, p. 153). The fetishist should not be aware of why (or sometimes even what) it is that he desires so fervently.

He follows this with a case description of a clothes fetishist who demanded the highest standards of dress in women he might find attractive. Interestingly, Freud connects the patient's choice of career, perhaps one not so dissimilar to Freud's own, with his sexual proclivities:

> The patient became a speculative philosopher, and names play for him an especially great role. In this patient something similar to what took place in the erotic domain occurred in the intellectual domain: he turned his interest away from things onto words, which are, so to speak, the clothes of ideas; this accounts for his interest in philosophy. (Rose, 1988, p. 154)

The conception that words are to ideas as clothes are to the naked body and that this is why his patient chooses to become a philosopher is an intriguing one, but he quickly goes on to say that clothes "grew into a fetish for him out of something completely opposite" (p. 154). This is revealed to be his mother's habit of undressing in front of the man as a child and that "In this way he became a voyeur" and then repressed this inclination, this incestuous desire. Even though he went on to become a clothes fetishist, it was instead "the unclothed state that interested him. Always the most interesting moment for him was when the pants fell, and these became for him the most important piece of clothing" (Rose, 1988, p. 155). Freud understands that the analysand's interest in clothes is really a screen for his interest in his mother's nakedness.

He bases this argument on the rather vague notion, later referred to as an "instinct", of a "drive to look, which likes to gaze and which is gratified by the act of undressing" (Rose, 1988, p. 156). If this "drive" is thwarted or "repressed":

> there suddenly emerges on the other side high esteem for what was concerned in a specific way with the scenes of undressing. He now no longer wants to look or to be reminded of it [his own desire]; but he now worships clothes. He now worships that which formerly prevented him from seeing: *he becomes a clothes fetishist out of the repression of a desire to look.* (Rose, 1988, p. 156: emphasis in original)

The important point in this, Freud argues, is that "fetishism does not derive from reminiscence", from some

sort of nostalgia, bur rather that a "repression of instinct" has occurred and this has been "instituted by the splitting of the complex". This means that a "portion is genuinely repressed" (the desire for his mother, or to look at his naked mother), "while the other portion is idealized, what in our case is specifically raised to a fetish" (Rose, 1988, p. 155). Although the man denies himself (or is denied by a psychic mechanism which may not be entirely subjective) the pleasure of incest (or the pleasure of looking with incestuous desire),[8] he moves the psychic charge surrounding the event to an associated object, the dropping pants and therefore to clothes more generally. Gamman and Makinen summarise:

> Freud's main concern in the 1909 discussion of fetishism focusses on the splitting process, whereby one aspect of the object gets suppressed, while the rest is idealised into a fetish. The fetish is chosen for its metonymic nearness to the moment of repression, rather than for any metaphoric aspect. (1994, p. 41)

In his analysis, Freud finds that the repressed portion of the fetish mechanism disappears into the unconscious and that the fetishist retains a sexual interest in a fairly harmless, associated object, or set of objects.[9] It is this formulation that is extended fully in the notion of disavowal, which comes to describe this splitting process more carefully.[10]

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[8] The term "scopophilia" is not a useful one as it describes rather than explains a so-called desire. This scopo-centrism, if such a clumsy neologism may be allowed, is one that facilely equates vision with a certain phenomenological primacy which, it may be safe to claim, is not solely available to the sighted. Gamman and Makinen refer to this as the "scopic drive" but it is not, I would argue, the "repression of the drive to look" that is important here, but the figure of incest (1994, p. 41).

[9] Even in 1907, Freud is still drawn to Binet's explanation and to the analysis of fetishism as being informed by "reminiscences": "Ever since Binet we have in fact tried to trace fetishism back to erotic impressions in childhood" ("Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*", 1991b, p. 71).

[10] In the discussion following the paper, of which Gamman and Makinen write, "two analysts (Steiner and Deutsch) suggested female analysands of their own who could be termed fetishists. Two of the ten analysts (Hitschmann and Bass) moreover, confess

In Strachey's introduction to "Fetishism", he points out that the fundamental development in Freud's thinking abut fetishism here is the introduction of the concept of disavowal (*Verleugnung*) and relates this to Freud's interest in the "splitting of the ego" (Freud, 1991b, p. 349). Freud begins by stating that almost no fetishist has come to his clinical attention because of their fetishism, on the contrary "they are quite satisfied with it, or even praise the way in which it eases their erotic life" (1991b, p. 351), but because they had to come to analysis for some other problem. Freud does not make a link between their other possible disorders and fetishism. He seems to imply that it is quite possible that many fetishists go about their business with no need for psychoanalysis. He does, however, come to the essential point very quickly:

> When I now announce that the fetish is a substitute for the penis, I shall certainly create disappointment; so I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost. That is to say, it should normally have been given up, but the fetish is precisely designed to preserve it from extinction. To put it more plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and – for reasons familiar to us – does not want to give up. (1991b, pp. 351-252)[11]

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themselves to be shoe and hair fetishists respectively and thank Freud for explaining their predilections, which says rather a lot about Freud's inspiration" (1994, pp. 41-42). They leave the vague accusation hanging. Nevertheless, one of the others present, Federn, comments on Sadger's report of a glove fetishist whose gloves were "an exquisite reminder to him of excrement", that "the patient might have been an excrement smearer; the gloves, then, would have prevented his smearing, just as they otherwise reminded him of it" (Rose, 1988, p. 162). The fetishist, in this reading, both wants to smear and is prevented from smearing by an object that reminds him of his desire to smear. This "exquisite" mechanism seems a particularly sophisticated way of replaying the fetishistic formulation almost indefinitely.

[11] In "On the Sexual Theories of Children" (1908), Freud explains: "The first of these theories […] consists in *attributing to everyone, including females, the possession of a penis*, such as the boy knows from his own body" (1991b, p. 193). This general valuing of the penis is linked to admonitions against

Freud explains that the boy's extraordinary regard for his penis exists because "Nature has, as a precaution attached [a portion of narcissism] to that particular organ" (1991b, pp. 352). This is perhaps the most unsatisfactory part of Freud's discussion since he presumes the value of the penis to be a universally understood, and sanctioned, truth. Of course, it is not the penis as physical organ that is particularly treasured but rather its symbolic life as representative of masculine power and dominance. Nevertheless, if we ignore this aspect of the analysis and understand that the "threat of castration" is a metaphorical threat of absolute annihilation (for either boy or girl child) then we can, perhaps, see the fetish structure as being relevant for more than a handful of happy enthusiasts.

The process of substitution is, however, central to this process of fetishisation and Freud introduces a new vocabulary:

> If we want to differentiate more sharply between the vicissitude of the *idea* as distinct from that of the *affect*, and reserve the word "*Verdrängung*" ["repression"] for the affect, then the correct German word for the vicissitude of the idea would be "*Verleugnung*" ["disavowal"]. (1991b, pp. 352-352)

By disavowal Freud means that the child has not "preserved unaltered his belief that women have a phallus", but rather that "He has retained that belief, but he has also given it up" (1991b, p. 353). Mannoni famously paraphrases this

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masturbation: "The effect of this 'threat of castration' is proportionate to the value set upon that organ and is quite extraordinarily deep and persistent. [...] The woman's genitalia, when seen later on are regarded as a mutilated organ and recall this threat, and they therefore arouse horror instead of pleasure in the homosexual" (p. 195). If all this were literally the case, it is surprising that any heterosexuals exist at all. As I will argue here, Freud's comments on castration should not be taken literally and should, rather, be considered as a more general analysis of the reaction to the threat of death or the unknown. It is unfortunate that this should be linked with any sex in particular, but I hope to show that both sexes can be seen to experience the fear of "castration".

process as *"Je sais bien, mais quand même…"*, I know very well, but all the same… (Mannoni, 1985). Freud explicates:

> Yes, in his mind the woman *has* got a penis, in spite of everything; but this penis is no longer the same as it was before. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its substitute, as it were, and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor. But this interest suffers an extraordinary increase as well, because the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in creation of this substitute. […] It remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it. (1991b, p. 353)

One may add that the token also contains the very fear of castration that provoked its construction in the first place. It is perhaps this very charge of angst that adds to the "extraordinary increase" in the potency of the fetish. If it is merely a "triumph" and a "protection" it would lose some of its nihilistic attraction.

The present thesis argues that this description of disavowal and the creation of the fetish substitute is a process that can be usefully understood to explain the formation of meaning as such, and the sign in particular.[12] While Freud describes disavowal and fetishism as being intrinsically connected to sexual difference, I would like to broaden his analysis in the following way: the fear of castration is a metaphor for the fear of annihilation, of non-meaning. George and Nelson write:

> The dichotomy between sexual fetish and death fetish is actually artificial, even though it is well

[12] Deleuze argues that disavowal is the basis of imagination itself: "The process of disavowal is linked to castration not contingently but essentially and originally; the expression of fetishistic disavowal, 'No, the mother does not lack a phallus,' is not one particular form of disavowal among others, but formulates the very principle from which the other manifestations of disavowal derive, namely the abolition of the father and the rejection of sexuality. Nor is disavowal in general just a form of imagination; it is nothing less than the foundation of the imagination, which suspends reality and establishes the ideal in the suspended world" (Deleuze, 1991, pp.127-128).

> disguised, as are all dichotomies between sex and death, or eros and thanatos. The threat of castration, with which the development of the sexual fetish is closely and causally associated, is the threat of death. The sexual fetish is organized as a defense against the absence, threatened or actual, of the phallus; the death fetish is organized, similarly, as a defense against death, the "absence", or cutting off, of life. (1982, p.137)[13]

Therefore it would seem clear that every human child, male or female, must at some point make the step from undifferentiated existence into the world of meaning. It is the realisation of the possibility of death, of self-destruction, that so scares the infant (*infans*, in the Latin sense of "non-speaking") that it cleaves to language as its only protection against this threat. In the creation of the fetish as a substitute, it acquires the ability to substitute more generally. The structure of the fetish, as a sign of something else, is the model that allows the system of signs to come into existence.[14] The logical problem here is to understand how the child realises that it could die, since that realisation would necessitate a certain understanding on the child's part which would *precede* the process of disavowal and of understanding. The only answer to this conundrum is to, perhaps

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[13] Neale provides a similar analysis: "Although, as a clinical perversion, fetishism is a specific psychic formation (and practice), it is, like all perversions, only a particular response to a universal human experience (in this case the experience of castration – of insufficiency, loss and lack); only a particularized extension of universal disavowal (the disavowal of the lack of the phallus – the mark of power and self-sufficiency – initially imagined as belonging to the mother)" (1990, p.167).

[14] "Given that Freud was simply attempting to trace the phenomenon of fetishism to the unconscious processes that constituted its origin, we cannot be surprised that he did not unduly preoccupy himself with the consequences that the ambiguity of the infantile *Verleugnung* might have on the status of the fetish object, or that he neglected to put this object into relation to the other objects that make up the world of human culture insofar as it is an activity that creates objects" (Agamben, 1993, pp. 32-33).

unsatisfactorily, claim that since we only ever understand from within the system of fetishism, we cannot understand, on its own terms, how that system came into existence. Perhaps one might cite Lacan's notion of the mirror phase here as an analogy to this problematic. How can the child (mis)recognise itself without already being constituted as an entity that could recognise itself? Richard Allen provides a useful summary of this:

> Before the mirror, spatially and temporally, there is the subject as no-thing. After the mirror, there is a subject as an entity. The no-thing is not in a position to *mis*recognize itself in the mirror because it is not yet an entity with recognition capacities. After the mirror there *is* an entity who recognizes herself as a subject, but this recognition is always and necessarily a misrecognition, for the subject is a no-thing. (Allen, 1995, pp. 140-141)

Disavowal allows the subject to believe two opposing propositions simultaneously. This is sometimes referred to as "oscillation", but this rather weakens the radical nature of the concept. It is not, as in Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit, that we see one thing one moment and another thing the next and then back again, but rather that we perceive both things to be true: the drawing is a duck and a rabbit all the time. Marcia Ian, in a discussion of the phallic mother, writes of

> Freud's definition of the psyche as the realm where the law of noncontradiction does not apply. In the psyche, both any idea *p* and its opposite not-*p* are true, and may either together or separately cause or prevent, animate or agitate, signify or deracinate, inspire or terrorize — or deaden. (Ian, 1993, p. 8)

Thus, in the world of signs (which is the psyche), we now simultaneously believe that the signs we use (language being the most basic) are not the reality they purport to describe, but we continue to act *as if* they were because we also believe them to be that reality. If we did not then we

would continually be doubting whether we were able to communicate with anybody at all. Perhaps we cannot, but all the same…

2.3 Hegel, Derrida and the Death Knell of Phallogocentrism

In *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1830), Friedrich Hegel discusses the differences in the ways in which Africa, Asia and Europe relate to the concept of "spirit". In Africa, Hegel observes,

> man has not progressed beyond a merely sensuous existence, and has found it absolutely impossible to develop any further. Physically, he exhibits great muscular strength, which enables him to perform arduous labours; and his temperament is characterised by good-naturedness, which is coupled, however, with completely unfeeling cruelty (pp. 172 – 173).

Asia is "the land of antithesis, division, and expansion" while Europe, conveniently enough, is "the land of spiritual unity, of retreat from this boundless freedom into the particular, of control of the immoderate and elevation of the particular to the universal, and of the descent of spirit into itself" (p. 173). Thus Africa is defined by its complete lack of access to spirit which implies that it has no universal moral guide and is subject to the capricious whims of the individual. He then goes on to characterise the religion of Africa in terms of its relationship to nature.

Hegel says that Africans "see nature as opposed to them" and that the forces of nature have individual numinous powers (p. 179). Because they, Hegel claims, do not recognise these "natural forces" as "having an eternal law or providence behind them" (and here, I think, we can understand that Hegel is referring to a notion of fatedness), the Africans believe that nature rules over them capriciously but that they see natural forces as "as

powers over which man can in some way gain mastery in turn". Hegel concludes that in Africa:

> Man knows only himself and his opposition to nature, and this is the sole rational element which the African peoples recognise. They acknowledge the power of nature, and attempt to raise themselves above it. (p. 179)

This power over nature is concentrated, the Africans believe, in certain individuals but that "they give this power of theirs a visible form, projecting it out of their own consciousness and making images of it" (p. 180). It is the objects that the people endow with this power that Hegel describes as fetishes. His criticism is that the Africans do not accept that there is a power which is beyond their own power, that "their god remains in their power, to be acknowledged and rejected at will, so that they do not progress beyond a condition of arbitrariness" (p. 181).

Derrida engages with this specific part of Hegel in *Glas*. His first observation is that Hegel appears to claim that the African is part of nature (having a "merely sensuous existence" (Hegel, op. cit.)) but that nature is dominated by man:

> A strange interpretation: one has just been told that the Negro merges with nature, and in a moment one is going to learn that nature dominates the Negro. (Derrida, 1986b, p. 208)

Since the African is part of nature it would seem illogical for him to try and dominate nature through the use of a fetish (in fact, the African himself would be just such a fetish).

Hegel's has a further condemnation of the African. They "know nothing of what we call the immortality of the soul" and therefore they have "a complete *contempt* for man" which leads to the "belief that it is quite normal and

permissible to eat human flesh" (Hegel, p. 182). This contempt also leads Hegel to understand why "*slavery* is the basic legal relationship in Africa" (p. 183). Derrida points to further contradictions in Hegel's thinking here since, as Hegel himself admits, "the Negro does not consider human flesh essentially to be nourishment" (Derrida, 1986b, p. 209). While Derrida does not spell out his critique of Hegel, he seems to pointing to the fact that if the African were pure nature then there would be no reason why he would have any qualms about feeding in his fellow beings for nourishment. Hegel, Derrida suggests, cannot reconcile the idea that Africans are both human and not-human. The implication of this is that if Hegel cannot clearly separate the non-human from the human, then his exaltation of the European as completely human must also be on shaky ground.

It is at this point in *Glas* that Derrida leaves Hegel and engages with Freud's formulation of the fetish. He points out that there is one "invariant predicate" to the concept of the fetish and that is that:

> it is a substitute — for the thing itself as center and source of being, the origin of presence, the thing itself par excellence, God or the principle, the archon, what occupies the center function in a system, for example the phallus in a certain phantasmatic organization. (p. 209)

The fetish always calls to mind that thing for which it is a substitute and that thing is "no longer itself a substitute; there is the nonsubstitute, that is what constructs the concept fetish". Derrida observes that the existence of a fetish implies that it points to a necessary non-fetish somewhere else (the meaning of that fetish). He writes that according "to this minimal conceptual determination, the fetish is opposed to the presence of the thing itself, to truth, signified truth for which the fetish is a substitutive signifier". In parentheses he adds that "from then on every fetish is a signifier, while every

signifier is not necessarily a fetish" (p. 209). He does not, however, explain what he means by this. He has defined the fetish as logically a signifier, but then claims that a signifier does not have to be a fetish. This does not make sense in his argument to this point. It would appear that Derrida is looking forward here to the next part of his discussion where he collapses the distinction between signifier and signified in the fetish – in fact, he will go on to argue that it is this collapse that defines the fetish (in disavowal). It is my contention that every signifier *is* also necessarily a fetish, but a fetish based on disavowal and not on substitution.

Derrida's argument is that the idea of the fetish as substitute for truth, as "the opposition of *Ersatz* to non*Ersatz*", is not an absolutely necessary way of conceptualising it. He says that there is enough in Freud to theorise a "concept" (here Derrida uses these quotation marks in his own text) of fetish "that no longer lets itself be contained in the space of truth, in the opposition *Ersatz*/non*Ersatz*, or simply in the opposition" (p. 209). He finds the evidence for this in Freud's discussion of very "subtle cases" of fetishism in which "the structure, the construction (*Aufbau*) of the fetish rest *at once* on the denial and on the affirmation (*Behauptung*), the assertion or the assumption of castration" (p. 210). It is in the simultaneity of holding two contradictory notions (there is and there is not a castration) that gives us a fetish which does not simply oppose truth to non-truth. Here, of course, we are in the space of disavowal.

Derrida opposes "strict fetishism" – a fetishism of substitution – to a "general fetishism" – a fetishism within which contradictions exist but are not opposed. This is an unravelling of the concept of system itself. Leavey glosses this argument thus:

> By calling into question the received notion of the fetish, Derrida wants to resist the tendency to use the concept of fetishism in a decidable way, as a vehicle with which to establish a reductive truth, which works against the very nature of fetishism as a phenomenon. (Leavey, 1986, p. 92)

We have thus on the one hand a very simple conception of the fetish as substitute and on the other, the more properly Freudian one, of the fetish as structured by disavowal. When the second conception is generalised then it becomes clear that there is no first simple fetish. In this way the entire structuralist project, based as it is on the idea of non-contradiction (one thing cannot be something else), unravels since we are in a "system" where commonsensical rules such as that of truth and non-truth this are no longer "true". This leads Derrida to posit disavowal (rather than fetishism) as the end of phallogocentrism:

> As soon as the thing itself, in its unveiled truth, is already found engaged, by the very unveiling, in the play of supplementary difference, the fetish no longer has any rigorously decidable status. *Glas* of phallogocentrism.[15] (p. 226)

It is in this sense that this thesis considers fetishism: not as merely a substitute mechanism, but as the description of the process by which the substitute mechanism is always already undone, but which is also at the same time the defence against such an undoing. Perhaps this is why this particular sentence of Derrida's, which would seem to be so crucial, is so seldom commented on. I know very well, but all the same…

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[15] Leavey comments without explaining: "When the fetish is generalized, losing its rigorously decidable status, the death knell of phallogocentrism is rung" (p. 93).

2.4 Žižek and the McGuffin

Throughout this thesis, I often refer to the fetish as having a very similar function to Slavoj Žižek's formulation of the McGuffin.[16] Alfred Hitchcock famously uses this word to indicate an object within a plot about which the characters were much exercised but was merely the pretext for the narrative to take place. In his *The Alfred Hitchcock Story*, Ken Mogg explains:

> The term "MacGuffin" was coined by Hitchcock's Scottish friend, screenwriter Angus MacPhail, for something that sets the film's plot revolving around it. It's really just an excuse and a diversion. In a whimsical anecdote told by Hitchcock, he compared the MacGuffin to a mythical "apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands". In other words, it could be anything - or nothing - at all. (1999, p. 101)

Žižek describes the McGuffin as "an empty place, a pure pretext whose sole role is to set the story in motion" (1992, p. 6) and allies it with Jacques Lacan's *objet petit a*, itself described as:

> Always already lost [the *object a*] exists only as the cause of desire. Rather than acknowledge the impossibility of its attainment the subject imagines it is located in an accessible elsewhere. (Lapsley, 1987, p.189)

If we understand the fetish to function in this way then its purpose is not, as in the "simple fetishism" outlined by Derrida above, merely a substitute for a truth, but rather that it is there to ensure that there is desire, that something rather than nothing exists. Thus the true significance of the fetish is not what trauma it conceals but rather that its existence guarantees signification, and life, as such.[17] Mladen Dolar explains the McGuffin thus:

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[16] This is sometimes spelled "MacGuffin" but here I use the spelling as it appears in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchock)* (Žižek, 1992)

[17] Harris cautions against equating the fetish with the Lacanian *objet petit a*, but "only because Lacan preserves the traditional connotation of fetishism as a pathology, while the *objet a* is a

> The McGuffins signify only that they signify, they signify the signification as such; the actual content is entirely insignificant. They are both at the core of the action and completely irrelevant; the highest degree of meaning — what everybody is after — coincides with an absence of meaning. (1992, p. 45)

This is why the objects in many of the texts I discuss below seem to have a structural rather then hidden meaning. They have no content in and of themselves other than being objects which are considered to be significant. I also argue in Section 6.8, "The Process of Criticism", that the films of the Brothers Quay (and perhaps all films) particularly function in this way when critics attempt to provide interpretations of them. The films appear to be laden within esoteric meaning and so the critics spends all his or her effort in following allusion after allusion only to conclude that there appear to be still further allusions to which the critic does not have access. The films' significance is that they inspire critical, interpretive activity, they are the "cause of desire", not that they themselves are internally significant in some way. The Quay films, however, seem particularly apt at luring the critic into the field of desire and their adeptness at eluding definitive explanation, their existence as ambiguous and uncanny objects, gives hope rather than despair.

It should be noted, however, that Žižek goes on to discuss two more types of object that appear in Hitchock's films. The second object he identifies is one that is "decidedly *not* indifferent, *not* pure absence", it is "the material presence of a fragment of reality". He defines this object as one of "exchange circulating among subjects, serving as a kind of guarantee, pawn, on their symbolic relationship" (1992, p. 6). He explains that at the beginning of a Hitchcock film "we have a non-structured, pre-symbolic,

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universal feature of mental life". However, Harris does continue to argue that "the *objet a* functions for everyone as the fetish functions for the fetishist: it is neither the cause nor the object of desire but a substitute for both, and in the case of the *objet a* an ever-changing substitute". (1992, p. 9)

imaginary homeostatic state of things" and that it is only with the introduction of the "little-bit-of-Real" that changes the "imaginary balance" into "a symbolically structured network through the a shock of the Real" (p. 7). This would appear to correspond with my understanding of the film as an object that exceeds the processes of interpretation that it brings into operation. The film that is projected before us is the "little-bit-of-Real" which is also the *objet petit a* and also the McGuffin and the fetish. This second type of Žižekian object would appear to be another way of describing the first.

Žižek then comes to the third object which has a "massive, oppressive material presence" but which is not an "indifferent void like the McGuffin". This third object "does not circulate between the subjects, it is not an object of exchange, it is just the mute embodiment of an impossible *jouissance*" (p. 7). He gives as examples of this the birds in *The Birds* (1963), the "hulk of the giant ship" in *Marnie* (1964) and Mount Rushmore in *North by Northwest* (1959). Dolar also proposes two categories of object:

> One is a vanishing point, immaterial in itself, which instigates the infinite metonymy; the second one has the massive non-transparent presence; it is endowed with sublime and lethal materiality; it is the evocation of what Lacan (following Freud and Heidegger) called *das Ding*. (pp. 45 – 46)

Dolar concludes that this second object (Žižek's third) is the "superstructure" of the "logic of the first" (p. 46). In this thesis this second object is called the institution. On the one hand it is embodied in the University, that object which looms behind the thesis, and on the other it is the institution of analysis, be it psychiatric or critical which calls forth the first object. However, as Lapsley points out, this second, monolithic objet provokes "unassuageable anxiety" because its real desire can never be known:

> Thrown into the world where its prematurity renders it totally dependent on another, each child has to address the question, "What does the Other want?" (*"Che vuoi?"*) [Lacan, *Ecrits*, third graph, p.313], a question without answer. Since the Other desires the *object a* and as the *object a* is unrepresentable, the Other's desire is destined to remain radically enigmatic. (1997, p. 190)

We have now a relationship between the Other (the mute monolith) and the *objet petit a* (the McGuffin, the fetish) which is based on a profound and necessary misunderstanding of what, on the one hand, the Other wants, and on the other, what the importance of the *objet petit a* might be. This misunderstanding is what allows signification to take place in its gap.

2.5 Film Theory and Fetishism

Film theory's engagement with the concept of fetishism has been largely negative. Developed during the heyday of 1970s *Screen* criticism, fetishism is mainly understood in the most simple of ways as the ideological justification for masculine exploitation, and "objectification", of women. Desire, which is the fuel of fetishism, is seen as the result of a power differential which is itself connected to capitalism. Thus fetishism is used in a derogatory manner to imply active, sadistic malice (an enjoyment of another's powerlessness) on the part of the (male) spectator. It is also used to designate a false consciousness which works to present this exploitation as natural and inevitable.

This approach is defined by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" where she particularly introduces the concept of "scopophilia", the love of looking, as the basis for a pathology of fetishism. She goes on to argue that the "voyeuristic-scopophilic look that is a crucial part of traditional filmic pleasure can itself be broken down" (1975, p. 18) and this is because:

> the structure of looking in narrative fiction film contains a contradiction in its own premises: the female image as a castration threat constantly endangers the unity of the diegesis and bursts through the world of illusion as an intrusive, static, one-dimensional fetish. (1975, p. 18)

Thus the thrust of much film criticism since this article has been in debunking fetishistic imagery and fetishism itself. However, Mulvey herself moves beyond this position in her later book *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996). In the introduction she considers the change in her thinking that has occurred over the years that this edited collection represents:

> While writing most of these essays, I thought of fetishism as a psychological and social structure that disavowed knowledge in favour of belief. At the same time, I was interested in considering curiosity, a desire to know, as a counterpoint to the blind-spots of fetishism. By degrees, I came to realise that the psychoanalytic concept of fetishism, because it could maintain knowledge and belief simultaneously, was more open to processes of decoding than other symptoms of unconsciousness. Its symptoms appear reified as things that attract the gaze but also provoke curiosity. Rather than seeing fetishism as irreconcilably polarised, I tried to find a more dialectical relationship between them. (p.xi)

Mulvey here discovers, as does Derrida, that if the fetish is understood in terms of disavowal rather than simple substitution (where true knowledge exchanged for false belief) then the fetish can be used productively to understood the process of signification which, as I am arguing, is structured by disavowal.

This is the way in which fetishism is being used more commonly in film theory. Steve Neale uses the idea to discuss special effects:

> [Christian] Metz draws on the psychoanalytic concept of disavowal, and on its model of the fetish, to pinpoint the nature of the divisions of knowledge and belief that the cinema, its fictions, and its special effects all, in their various ways, involve. Just as

> the fetishist both avows and disavows an absence, a lack (the lack, for the fetishist proper, of the phallus wished for in the object of desire), so the fictional representation, the cinematic image, and the special effect both avow and disavow something that does not actually exist. (1990, p. 167)

It is this developed tradition of fetish film criticism that Joanna Malt uses as the basis for her recent work on fetishism and surrealism:

> As a critical term, fetishism has been riding high in recent years, and my own use of it draws on the wide range of contexts and associations it brings with it. The sense in which I use the term draws from psychoanalytic theory, particularly as it is used in film criticism. Film theorists such as Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey, and cultural critics such as Emily Apter employ a more ambivalent model of fetishism as, to some extent, an enabling function, thanks to the cognitive trick operated by fetishistic disavowal. Disavowal, described by Freud in his account of fetishism, is a process which allows knowledge and contradictory belief to coexist. It permits a paradoxical fluidity in ways of thinking the world, even while tending towards fixity and repetition in its detail. (2004, pp. 5 – 6)

Metz himself explains the importance of the fetish in terms of its ambiguity rather than in its supposed role as sinister concealer of power relations. He says in a 1979 interview in answer to a question about the experience of anxiety in the cinema and whether this is related to the castration anxiety presumably at the basis of fetish formation:

> The image is a present print of an absent object [and this causes a] kind of anxiety, yes. But it has to do with the very fact of the image – the image is something very strange – it's a mixture of presence and absence. And so it replays the game of castration: "to be or not be," death anxiety. I think that the image is very important for a particular status, precisely because it is a specific mixture of fulfillment and lack. (qtd in Harris, 1992, pp. 148 – 149)

It is clear here that the fetish, as I discuss later, is being allied more and more to the uncanny and that a stress

is being laid on its ambiguous theoretical structure rather than on its structure as aggressive displacer.[18] Malt comments: "Like the uncanny, fetishism draws much of its power to disturb from the tension it enacts between familiarity and estrangement" (2004, p. 6). Thus the trajectory of the fetish in film criticism has been from a consideration of it as an aberrant pathology to an embrace of the possibilities offered by understanding disavowal to be at its centre.

Perhaps the most sustained (and idiosyncratic) work on fetishism and film is *The Film Fetish* (1992), a rather obscure book by Kenneth Marc Harris. He argues that the concept of fetishism has been used in two different senses in film theory:

> The first concerns the specific representations of human beings in individual films or kinds of films, and the second concerns the medium of film (or the institution of cinema) in general. (p. 141)

He argues, however, that there should be "no disjunction between the fetishism of certain images in films and the fetishization of the medium as a whole" (p. 147). He follows Metz to a certain extent in his understanding of the anxiety that cinema causes in its play of absence in presence but also sees that fetishism is a way of alleviating not only that anxiety, but anxieties "generated outside the cinema" (p.150). In a very prosaic move, Harris claims that it is in the ability to always be able to watch another film that gives cinema its therapeutic attraction. He concludes his book on an endearingly non-academic note when he writes:

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[18] Metz's position, however, is still fairly traditional. Harris summarises Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier* thus: "Just as the sexual fetishist prizes women's undergarments because they conceal a reality he cannot accept, so the cinema fetishist is enraptured by films that are designed to obliterate all traces of their having been produced" (1992, pp. 4 – 5).

> As the only promise kept by life is death, a film thus becomes a life-substitute that promises everything and anything other than death, but most poignantly "fails to offer the satisfactions promised" when the film does come to its end.
>
> To keep from going batty, the film fetishist thereupon takes in another film. (pp. 158 – 159)

This constant and continuing desire, and not that desire's satisfaction, is invoked by film, by the fetish, by the *objet petit a*. It is in the absence of internal significance, in a generalised fetishism, that signification exists and becomes productive.

Chapter 3: "A wolf's skin was hairy on the outside, His on the inside": Hair and Fur in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology

> The important point is not that hair can, like shoes or overcoats, become a sexual symbol, but that unlike these objects it has practically no other significance in our present day life. (Berg, 1951, p. 66)

For millennia hair and fur have been part of a debate surrounding the meaning of objects within culture. This chapter will explore some of the ways in which these discussions illuminate the way in which cultural meaning can be understood to attach itself to apparently meaningless things. I will discuss the ways in which the representation of both hair and fur within works by Apuleius, Titian, Wenceslaus Hollar, the Sacher-Masochs and Franz Kafka articulate an ambiguous discourse concerning the attraction that hair appears to exercise. I will also consider meta-discourses about the meaning of hair (and fur) in psychoanalysis, anthropology and cultural criticism in order to propose a fundamental ambiguity in the discussion of the ambiguity of the object of hair itself. This ambiguity, I argue, stems from the double-bind of the origin of cultural meaning, in the sense that culture is defined as that which has meaning, while meaning is that which defines culture: meaninglessness indicates the absence of culture while culture is predicated on the existence of meaning. It is therefore impossible to judge which of these might precede the other: meaning or culture; and it is this impossibility that is therefore necessarily written in the objects that constitute culture and have cultural meaning. By choosing a very specific set of variously related objects (hair and fur) and considering the ways in which these have been argued to function within culture it is possible to see clearly this prior impossibility (which Jacques Derrida sometimes calls *différance*) in the discourse of and surrounding these objects. In addition, this chapter will also attempt to

explore a non-rational (or perhaps, non-linear) approach to interpreting cultural objects.

Perhaps the most straightforward introduction to the cultural history of hair can be found in Wendy Cooper's 1971 *Hair: Sex, Society, Symbolism* in which the author combines a biological and "evolutionary" description of hair occurrence in human beings with a broader social history of hair through various times and societies.[19] Cooper's approach stresses the difference between the meaning of male and female hair and provides a corrective to some of the preceding psychoanalytic discussions of this sexual differentiation (we will consider this in more detail below). Cooper is also interested in the seeming universality of the importance, if not quite centrality, of hair to culture and concludes that:

> The world about us will change, our skills and technology continue to improve, but human nature changes little, and there seems no doubt that, as far into the future as we can see, man will go on responding to the fascination of hair and using its power, sexually and socially, as he has always done. (p. 233)

Despite her dabblings in evolutionary theory, Cooper surmises a certain universal "human nature" that will remain fixated on the "power" of hair. Her argument throughout the book, however, is that while hair is patently of great interest in many societies, there is no uniformity of interpretation as to what particular hair practices might signify. In a discussion of female sexuality and hair, she observes that "there seem to be two

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[19] Cooper's discussion of the relationship of hair to evolution is less than satisfactory and she admits that she is more interested in the anecdotal interest of imprecise theorising than any rigorous discussion of evolutionary theory. After a lyrical but highly unconvincing description of the possible impact that rock pool wading might have had on hair loss and bipedal ambulation, Cooper admits: "This intriguing theory, originally introduced almost frivolously as part of an after-dinner speech [by an unnamed source], has no real evidence to support it, but it neatly explains some odd facts" (p. 15). It can safely be assumed that Cooper's crude Darwinism is inessential to much of her book.

conflicting strands of hair symbolism. Loose, uncut hair [in women] is seen both as a symbol of virginity and as a symbol of promiscuity". (p. 67) It is unclear from the chapter whether these "conflicting strands" of interpretation can appear within the same societal group or whether such conflict only manifests itself between different sets of cultural norms. Nevertheless, Cooper points out that there appears to be no general conclusion to be made about the way in which hair behaviour might be interpreted within any particular group. She writes:

> Men with red hair, men with dark hair, men with no hair, all in their turn are credited with superior virility. But truth is sometimes an elusive thing. Like beauty it may well lie in the eye of the beholder, and like faith it may in the end be only what we believe. (p. 62)

The only "truth" that Cooper can claim for hair is that it does appear to be of great interest in almost all societies and that meaning is associated with certain forms of hair grooming but that those meanings are absolutely arbitrary and have no positive connection with the action itself.[20] The important point appears to be, as Berg writes in the epigraph to this chapter, that hair in itself has no practical function as such but that since it is easily malleable and seems to occur universally in human beings, it lends itself to symbolic functions within culture. In this sense, hair can be seen to both reflect and constitute the distinction between culture and chaos. It is hair's very uselessness that allows it to be easily employed in the manufacture of meaning. However, this meaning will never be unequivocal, even within close social groups, since it is hair (among other things) that simultaneously defines culture and is defined by culture.

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[20] For instance, a "positive" (i.e. non-arbitrary) connection might be something along the lines that red hair indicates sexual passion since it is close to the colour of the "glans penis or vulva" (Berg, 1951, p. 68). All such connections seem, however, not to be universal. This will be discussed in more detail in our discussion of anthropology and hair.

It may be useful to consider the status of hair as a symbol with reference to Charles S. Peirce's tripartite classification of index, icon and symbol as well as Ogden and Richards' symbolic schema in *The Meaning of Meaning.*[21] In Volume II of his collected papers, "Elements of Logic", Peirce asserts that logic is "only another name for *semiotic*, the quasi-necessary, or formal, doctrine of signs" (p. 132).[22] He then goes on to define the sign (or *representamen*) as "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect of capacity" and that this sign "creates in the mind of that [addressed] person an equivalent sign" which Peirce calls the "*interpretant*" (p. 135). He then further divides the sign into the "*object*" (that for which it stands) and the "*ground*" (the idea that exceeds the specific *object*). This schema may be represented thus:

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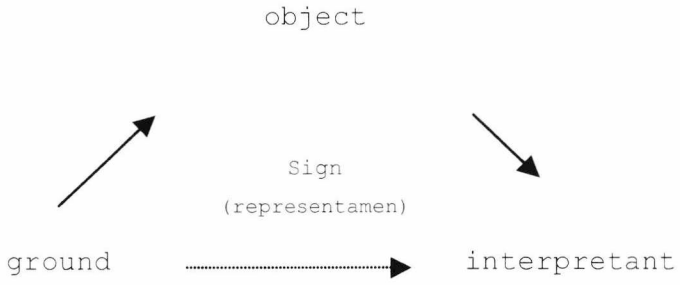
[21] It may be useful to note here the difference between the terms "symbol" and "sign". There is the possibility of some confusion since this words are often used interchangeably in everyday discourse and also because "sign" is a term used by both Saussure and Peirce in slightly different ways. For Peirce the sign is a tripartite entity (consisting of object, ground and interpretant) while for Saussure the sign is made up of the signifier and the signified. In Peirce's linguistics a sign can be of three different types: index (where the sign is directly connected to its referent, e.g., a footprint), icon (where the sign strongly resembles its referent, e.g., a portrait) and symbol (where the sign is only associated with its referent by convention, e.g., a word). Thus, in Peirce's taxonomy a symbol is always a sign, but a sign is not necessarily always a symbol. For Saussure, the distinctions between index, icon and symbol are largely irrelevant since their structure in each case is still of a relationship between signifier and signified and that every such relationship is arbitrary and conventional. For Saussure, every sign is always a symbol. In vernacular use, of course, a symbol is understood to be an object or representation which has a meaning that is different from its obvious one. Thus, the fetish is perhaps most closely allied to this last usage since the object has both a secular existence (as a shoe or piece of fur) and a more esoteric one (as the representation of a forgotten trauma).

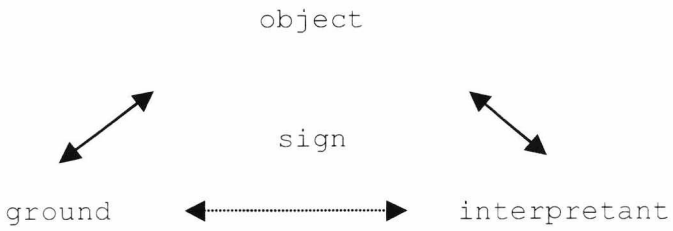
[22] Peirce explains that the semiotic is "quasi-necessary" since it is based on "Abstraction" and is necessarily inductive in origin. It merely describes what *is,* rather than what *must be* (p. 135).



In this diagram the dotted line indicates that there is no real connection between the ground and the interpretant but merely an assumed relationship (this will become more clear when we discuss Ogden and Richards). In our example of hair, this representation would look like this:

Peirce then divides the "science of semiotic" into three branches, the first of which he terms *"pure grammar"* which "has for its task to ascertain what must be true of the representamen used by every scientific intelligence in order that they may embody any *meaning*" (p. 135). It is in the movement from ground to object to interpretant that the sign becomes meaningful but, as is clear from the two diagrams, it is not possible to determine the way in which the arrows of meaning move. The relationship between the ground and the interpretant (cultural ideas of hair and

individual understanding of hair) as mediated through the object cannot be straightforward since each is the condition of the other. This might be described as a cybernetic loop and could be represented thus:



The relationship between ground and interpretant is self-reinforcing and each feeds into the possibility of the other in a continuous vacillation that is apparent in the unstable meaning of the sign. There is thus no *pure grammar* that would be able to determine the truth of the sign. Of course, this loop is not a closed system and this sign would, as in the Saussurian paradigm, be part of a much larger system of signs. Still, this would not solve the problematic relationship of ground to interpretant at a fundamental level since this issue would merely be played out on a macro rather than micro level. This instability will also impact on an understanding of the object itself since the exact definition of what an object might be will depend on the way in which the ground and the interpretant interact in order to produce the sign. The object, therefore, should not be thought of as an anchor in this schema. If, for instance, we begin to think about the difference between hair and fur (as we will do in more detail below), we will see that this apparent empirical difference between objects is dependent on the particular historical and social configuration of ground and interpretant.

In the following section, "The Sign and its Object", Peirce uses the word Object, with a capital "O", to designate what he has previously called meaning. He writes that "in order that anything should be a Sign, it must 'represent', as we say, something else, called its *Object*" (p. 136).[23] After some examples of what such representation may be, he produces an extraordinarily vertiginous passage:

> If a Sign is other than its Object, there must exist, either in thought or in expression, some explanation or argument or other context, showing how – upon what system or for what reason the Sign represents the Object or set of Objects that it does. Now the Sign and the Explanation together make up another Sign, and since the explanation will be a Sign, it will probably require an additional explanation, which taken together with the already enlarged Sign will make up a still larger Sign; and proceeding in the same way, we shall, or should, ultimately reach a Sign of itself, containing its own explanation and those of all its significant parts; and according to this explanation each such part has some other part as its Object. (pp. 136-137)

Every Sign/Object relationship must be the Object of another Sign until we reach a "Sign of itself". Peirce designates this as the *Precept*, "according to which [the Sign] is to be understood as a sort of emanation, so to speak, of its Object" (p. 137). At the end of the Chinese box structure of (almost) infinite Signs and Objects, we come to a Sign (the precept) that is, in fact, the Object. It is this point, when (or where) the Sign and the Object are the same, that is the possibility of the difference between Sign and Object. The point of the *Precept* is to allow the existence of representation while it is itself beyond representation: it is a Sign of itself, it is its own Object. The *Precept* is both Sign and Object. Once again, of course, we find ourselves in the territory of *différance*.

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[23] Later, Peirce reproduces the definition of "represent" from the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*: "To stand for, that is, to be in such a relation to another that for certain purposes it is treated by some mind as if it were that other" (Vol II, p. 155).

Peirce's conclusion from this is that the Sign "can only represent the Object and tell about it. It cannot furnish acquaintance with or recognition of that Object" (p. 137). Paradoxically, the Sign cannot tell us anything that we do not already know since any relationship between Subject and Object is predicated on a prior understanding of the possibility of relationship itself. Without such a *preceptual* understanding there cannot be any understanding at all. This is the strict logic of the *Precept*:

> If there be anything that conveys information and yet has absolutely no relation nor reference to anything with which the person to whom it conveys the information has, when he comprehends that information, the slightest acquaintance, direct or indirect — and a very strange sort of information that would be — the vehicle of that sort of information is not, in this volume, called a Sign. (p. 137)

Understanding of the radically new makes no sense here since, by definition, this would not be understanding. We can only understand that which we already understand in one way or another. Hair, then, only makes sense within the context of our understanding of hair but this context is itself part of a broader context of understanding which constrains the meanings that we might associate with hair and simultaneously allows meaning to exist. In this way, meaning is always partial and never complete, since for meaning to be complete would mean that the distinction between Sign and Object, between the meaning of hair and hair itself, would no longer exist and we would enter a realm beyond information since there would be no Object to which that Sign could refer and, in addition, it would be itself an Object with no Sign. In effect it is the Sign of itself. The paradox of this is that meaning can only come into existence from a place of non-meaning, from the place of the *Precept*.[24]

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[24] Jonathan Culler comments on this section from Peirce: "There is, as Derrida would say, no full meaning but only *différance*

It is clear, of course, that Peirce is no longer making reference to the tripartite structure of the sign described above (ground, object, interpretant)[25] but has rather replaced this with a simpler dyadic relationship: Sign/Object. It is this relationship between Sign and Object that allows him to define the three classes of Signs: *Icon*, *Index* and *Symbol*. He defines the *Icon* as "a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own, and which it possesses, just the same" and that anything, "be it quality, existent individual, or law, is an Icon of anything, in so far as it is like that that thing and used as a sign of it" (Vol II, p. 143). In this sense objects that resemble hair and are used to represent it, such as plastic fibres on dolls' heads or even wigs, natural or not, are Icons.

Peirce defines the *Index* as "a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object" and that it "necessarily has some Quality in common with the Object" (Voll II, p. 143). Here he notes that this makes the Index an Icon "of a peculiar kind" since there must be a resemblance between Index and Object just as there is between Icon and Object, but that the Index is additionally defined by its "actual modification" by the Object (Vol II, p. 143). He later gives the following examples of indexicality:

> I see a man with a rolling gait. This is a probable indication that he is a sailor. I see a bowlegged man in corduroys, gaiters, and a jacket. These are probable indications that he is a jockey or something

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(differences, deferment): the signified can be grasped only as the effect of an interpretive or productive process in which interpretants are adduced to delimit it" (Culler, 1975, p. 20).

[25] This is Peirce's second "trichotomy of signs", the first being the lesser known divisions of *Qualisign* ("a quality which is a sign"), *Sinsign* ("an actual existent thing or event which is a sign") and *Legisign* ("a law that is a sign"). Peirce also goes on to identify eight other trichotomies but their usefulness in understanding signs and their relationship to objects seems limited and the definitions are less than clear (see Peirce, 1960, Vol II, p. 142).

> of that sort. A sundial or a clock *indicates* the time of day. […] A rap on the door is an index. Anything which focuses the attention is an index. Anything which startles us is an index, in so far as it marks the junction between two portions of experience. […] A weathercock is an index of the direction of the wind, so that there is a real connection between them […].(Vol II, p. 161)

It is this "real connection" that fundamentally makes the difference between and index and an icon. If we consider our previous example of the wig, it is true that whether that wig be made of human hair or some artificial substance, it will in either case be an icon of hair. However, only the wig made of human hair will be an index of hair (presumably a wig made of horse hair would be some sort of partial index). The hair of a dead lover woven into a brooch would also be an index of that lover.

A *Symbol*, Peirce continues, "is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause a Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object" (Vol II, p. 143). There is thus an arbitrary, legal, relationship between Symbol and Object which is dependent on tradition, agreement or proclamation and not on any real or perceived relationship. Peirce describes it as a "conventional sign" (Vol II, p. 167). In this sense, the word "hair" is a symbol of hair itself. Peirce writes that "all words, sentences, books and other conventional signs are Symbols" (Vol II, p. 165).

It is clear that in various forms hair can be either an Icon, and Index or a Symbol but that within the broader structure of the Peircean Sign hair must necessarily always slip away from any consistent interpretation. The relationship between ground and interpretant can never be absolutely defined and it is this instability of the sign itself that comes to the fore in Ogden and Richards discussion of meaning.

3.1 Ogden and Richards: The Meaning of Meaning

In Appendix D ("Some Moderns") of their *The Meaning of Meaning* (originally published in 1923), Ogden And Richards dedicate the final section to reproducing extracts from Peirce's work which were not easily available in the early 1920s. They do not however provide much commentary of his thinking and introduce Peirce with the words:

> Unfortunately his terminology was so formidable that few have been willing to devote time to its mastery [...] (p. 279)

In the previous section I attempted to explain the relevance of Peirce's work on signs and semiotics without getting caught up in the intricacies of his many distinctions since these do not appear to be essential to the fundamentals on which Peirce's schema seems to be based: that is, the tripartite structure of the sign and the paradoxical primacy of the *Precept*.

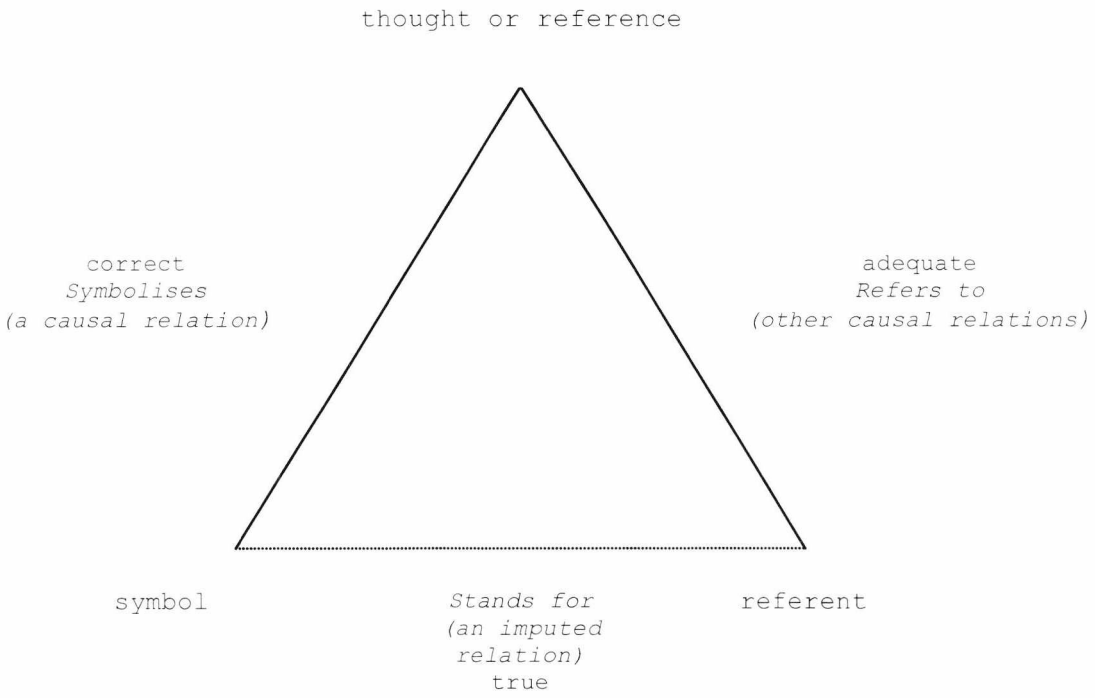
Ogden and Richards' book is meant as a corrective to thinkers who purport to discuss the question of meaning without paying attention to the way in which meaning is conveyed through the use of language. They express the "need for a clear analysis of the relation between words and facts as the essential of a theory of Meaning" (p. 2). They also warn of the "tyranny of language over those who propose to inquire into its workings" (p. 4) and cite Saussure as a prime example of one overcome by this danger. They claim that Saussure "obeys blindly the primitive impulse to infer from a word some object for which it stands" (p. 4) and that Saussure's formulation of *la langue* is fanciful since it is "outside the range of possible investigation" (p. 5). They quote Saussure's definition of *langue*: "It is at once a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions adopted by the social body to allow the exercise of this faculty by

individuals" (p. 5). Harris' translation of this reads: "The structure of a language is a social product of our language faculty. At the same time, it is also a body of necessary conventions adopted by society to enable members of society to use their language faculty" (Saussure, 1990, pp. 9-10 [p. 25]). This makes Ogden and Richards' problem clearer. If *langue* is the result of a "language faculty", but is, at the same time, that which allows the "use" of that very language faculty, then what exactly is the status of this structure? Ogden and Richards find this an "elaborate construction" that "as a guiding principle for a young science is fantastic" (p. 5).[26] They conclude that "this theory of signs, by neglecting entirely the things for which signs stand, was from the beginning cut off from any contact with scientific methods of verification" (p. 6). They themselves, however, cannot solve this problem by appealing to the evidence of "things for which signs stand" as this would imply an *a priori* relationship between thing and sign that would be exactly *langue* (with its concomitant dilemma of being both *a priori* and *a posteriori*).

Nevertheless, Ogden and Richards do provide a very clear explanation of the structure of the sign itself, which is helpful to consider in relation to our discussions of Peirce and of hair. In order to illustrate the "indirectness of the relations between words and things" (p. 10), Ogden and Richards propose another tripartite structure consisting of Symbol, Thought and Referent. Symbol is related causally to Thought (which is a result of "social and psychological factors" (p.10) and can therefore be understood as the cultural context of communication), while the connection between Thought and Referent is less straightforward. This can be "more or less direct (as when we think about or attend to a coloured surface we see)" or

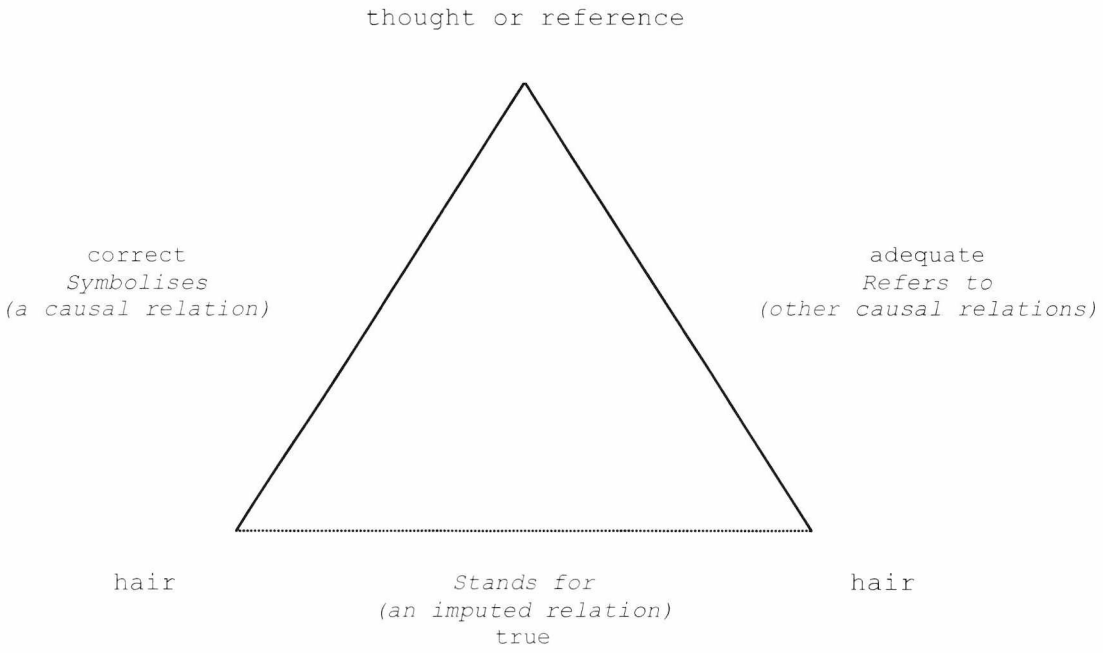
[26] They are, in fact, pointing to the same problem that Derrida will go on to discuss in his analysis of Saussure in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", which is itself discussed later in this thesis.

"indirect (as when we 'think of' or 'refer to' Napoleon)" (p. 11). However it is difficult to see how this relationship is established and exactly what its status might be. In terms of colour, for instance, Culler comments that "although everyone knows that the spectrum of colours is a continuum, within a culture people tend to regard individual colours as natural classes" (Culler, 1975, p. 14). The relationship between Thought and Referent in this situation is unclear (and perhaps undecideable) but the main point seems to be that we should be wary of too quickly assuming that the Referent is in some way pre-given or "natural". Ogden and Richards provide this illustration of their structure (p. 11):



The main point here is that between "the symbol and the referent there is no relevant relation other than the indirect one" (p. 11) and that it is therefore a mistake to imagine that there is any direct relationship between symbol and referent. If we expand Ogden and Richards' definition of symbol beyond the word to include objects

that may be endowed with a certain meaning (such as hair) we then notice that there is an odd confluence of symbol and referent since, practically, these are both the same object:



The physical referent and the symbol that stands for it are embodied in the same object and it is the Thought that determines the meaning of this double entity. This may account for the possibility of imputing a "natural" or immanent meaning to an object such as hair since there is no difference between its symbol and its referent. It is therefore the complex of causal relationships (via Thought, or rather, that *is* Thought) that determines the status of both symbol and referent. The conclusion that must be drawn is that the proper object of interpretive study cannot be either symbol or referent but must necessarily be the system of causal relationships that create these two entities. In the case of hair, for instance, it is in the various discourses surrounding hair that will allow us to understand what hair might be (both as symbol and referent). What we will also see is that there is an

inevitable ambiguity in these discourses. If hair is seen to be meaningful it is only in the discussion of its meaning that this meaning arises. Thus it is not as if the discourse of hair is external to the definition of what hair is, but must be an integral part of that definition. Definition, understood as the "setting of bounds" (OED), can only do its job by being both internal and external. The rules of the definition of hair, for instance, are determined by the way in which hair is used, culturally, to mean something (internal) but at the same time in order to understand the cultural use of hair, this object must already be understood some other way (external). It is this fundamental problematic that we will explore by looking at a number of cultural uses and definitions of hair (and fur).

3.2 Between Human and Animal

The difference between hair and fur may be understood as the difference between human and animal and it is exactly this distinction that is explored by Franz Kafka in his famous short story, "The Metamorphosis" (1915).[27] As Gregor Samsa tries to explain his continuing absence ("he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous insect" (p. 76)) through his closed door, the chief clerk, who has come to ascertain why Gregor was not on the 5am train for work, remarks: "That sounded like an animal" (p. 85) and it is the loss of the faculty of speech that first notifies others of his change (though, of course, he is himself aware of this through his bodily alteration and his words seem to him to be perfectly understandable even though they "were evidently no longer intelligible" (p. 85)).

[27] This is called "The Transformation" in Malcolm Pasley's translation, but I will refer to the story by its more usual English title.

In this story of inexplicable and unavoidable change from human to non-human, I wish to consider the importance of one object in Gregor's room, a small picture of a woman, which Gregor himself, it transpires, went to some pains to make. His mother explains:

> The only relaxation he gets is doing his fret-work [ornamental carving, *Laubsägearbeiten*]. For instance, he spent two or three evenings making a little picture-frame; you'd be surprised how pretty it is. It's hanging there in his room; you'll see it as soon as Gregor opens the door. (pp. 82-83)

Other than this leisure activity, the "boy thinks of nothing but his work" (p. 82) as a commercial traveller, an occupation that evidently afforded him no joy at all and was forced upon him due to his family's dire financial circumstances.[28] It is the fret-work frame that seems to sum up what makes Gregor Samsa more than a mere mechanical creature and it is also the very first object that Gregor notices when he wakes up in bed, rather bewildered by what has happened to him:

> Above the table, on which an assortment of cloth samples had been unpacked and spread out – Samsa was a commercial traveller – there hung the picture which he had recently cut out of a glossy magazine and put in a pretty gilt frame. It represented a lady complete with fur hat and fur stole, who was sitting upright and extending to view a thick fur muff into which the whole of her forearm had vanished. (p. 76)

This object is then of double importance. Not only is the frame a product of Gregor's only human activity, but the picture is of a very specific and rather peculiar subject. The lady in the fur has been linked to the work of Leopold van Sacher-Masoch, of whose *Venus in Furs* Kafka may have

[28] See p. 97 and also Vladimir Nabokov's commentary on the story in a lecture: "It transpires that in his human past Gregor has been deceived by his family. Gregor had taken that dreadful job with that nightmare firm because he wished to help his father who five years ago had gone bankrupt" (Nabokov, n.d., internet).

been aware.[29] It is also probable that Kafka is referring to work of the Prague-born illustrator, Vaclav (Wenceslaus) Hollar (1607-1677), whose numerous etchings of everyday dress also included women dressed in furs with their hands tucked in muffs.[30] Within a much broader study of fur within cultural, historical and economic contexts, Julia Emberley sees this image in "The Metamorphosis" as fetishistically "overdetermined to the degree that its effect is comedic, an amplified version of 'castration anxiety' blown up with the aid of photographic simulation" (p. 93) and claims that:

> Gregor Samsa is a composite figure taken from *Venus in Furs*. He actualizes a masculine, bestial version of oppression which Masoch could reproduce only in a feminine version of an almost-but-not-quite-sign-of-humanity, the fur-clad woman. (p. 93)

For Emberley, the figure in Samsa's frame is to some extent a joke about fetishism, although it would be difficult to make any direct connection to Freud's formulation of the fetish structure. Nevertheless, it is possible to read the occurrence of the framed woman in the second paragraph of "The Metamorphosis" as strikingly similar to the disavowal associated with fetishism. Gregor wakes up to find that his entire life is entirely different, nothing is as it was before, and his "numerous legs [...] danced helplessly before his eyes" (p. 76). The very next object he sees is the woman in furs. Freud writes in "Fetishism":

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[29] As pointed out by F.M. Kunda in "Art as Direct Vision: Kafka and Sacher-Masoch" (*Jour*nal of European Studies vol 2, 1972: pp. 237-246), R.K. Angress in "Kafka and Sacher-Masoch: A note on *The Metamorphosis*" in *Modern Language Notes*. vol 85, 1970: pp.745-6) and, most comprehensively, by Eric Santner in "Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and the Writing of Abjection" in *The Metamorphosis: Translation/Backgrounds and Contexts/Criticism.* (Trans. & Ed. Stanley Corngold. W.W. Norton: New York & London, 1996) especially pp. 204-206.

[30] Hollar's fascination with fur is discussed in some detail in *Venus and Furs: The Cultural Politics of Fur* (Emberley, 1998, pp. 109-122). Emberley reads these images "as anticipatory codes of sexual fetishism" and traces the way in which his possible sexualisation of this imagery is ignored in commentaries on Hollar which see the illustrations as merely representative of historic fashion.

> Fur and velvet – as has long been suspected – are a fixation of the sight of pubic hair, which should have been followed by the longed-for sight of the female member. (p. 354)

In this particular juxtaposition of quotes[31] it seems that we may be able to make a fairly literal reading of Kafka through Freud. However, there is no reason to suppose that there is any such direct connection, merely that it is suggestive.[32] Perhaps we can only note that this object, fur, is significant nut that it is impossible to adduce what its significance might be. In Ogden and Richards' terms, we cannot establish the causal chain from symbol to referent (neither of which seem stable in the first place).

The picture of the woman in furs continues to hold a dramatic force in "The Metamorphosis". When his sister and their maid begin emptying out his room, Gregor feels extremely threatened and, beside himself, reacts by protecting the apparently useless picture:

> And so he broke out from his cover […] – changed direction four times, for he really didn't know what to salvage first, then spotted the picture of the lady all swathed in furs hanging so conspicuously on what was otherwise a bare wall, crawled rapidly up to it and pressed himself against the glass, which held him fast and soothed his hot belly. (p. 105)

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[31] Freud's "Fetishism" postdates "The Metamorphosis" by 12 years, although this particular idea, that the fetish stands for the woman's missing penis, is expressed as early as 1910. See Footnote 1 added at that time to the discussion of fetishism in the *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905): "the foot represents a woman's penis, the absence of which is deeply felt" (p. 68).

[32] For instance, Hans Bellmer read Freud and explicitly made works that reflect that reading. While Freud saw disavowal and fetishism as unconscious processes, the representation of these processes by Bellmer makes it difficult to know what value to place on using Freud's schema to interpret that work: "When Bellmer, to take one example, produces a print in which the woman's crouching body is itself composed as a huge penis, her hanging breasts its testicles, or when, to take another, spread-legged little girls sprout erect penises from their vaginas, we are far from the workings of the unconscious" (Solomon-Godeau, 1992, internet).

For some reason it is to the picture that Gregor is, literally and figuratively, attached: "He clung to his picture and was not going to give it up. He would rather fly in Grete's face" (p. 105). Emberley's reading of this as a "final attempt to secure the territorialization of women's bodies in the domestic space of the empire and to remap her territorialization in the guise of an animal" (p. 94) seems laboured and obscure.[33] However, her discussion is based on Deleuze and Guattari's reading of this section of "The Metamorphosis", which offers a slightly clearer statement. They write:

> To please him, his sister wanted to empty out the whole room. But Gregor refused to let go of the portrait of the lady in fur. He sticks to the portrait, as if to a last territorialized image. In fact, that's what the sister cannot tolerate. She accepted Gregor; like him, she wanted the schizo incest, an incest of strong connections, incest with the sister in opposition to Oedipal incest, incest that gives evidence of a nonhuman sexuality as in the becoming-animal. But, jealous of the portrait, she begins to hate Gregor and condemns him. (pp. 14-15)

In their reading of this, Deleuze and Guattari claim that Gregor does not have the courage of his convictions and refuses to give up the last vestige of his humanity that

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[33] In an earlier article, Emberley stresses more clearly the relation between fur and women in a capitalist economy: "If the commodity fetishism of fur - the degree to which this dead animal-hide dissimulated the power of capitalist expansion - can be said to correspond to the labour power hidden under the flesh of workers, I would also suggest that with Hollar's etchings we can see the degree to which the sexual fetishism of fur constituted a new mode of gendered dissimulation corresponding to patriarchal relations of power, eroticism, and the exchange of women. "(Emberley, 1996, p.440). The argument here is that just as fur is used as an object of exchange-value, so this exchange-value is transferred to the woman who is wearing it. If a woman is wearing an expensive fur, so that woman becomes correspondingly more valuable (or rather, the fur reflects the exchange-value of the woman). This exchange value, for Emberley, is then eroticised through some form of fetishism (although she does not herself explore this in any detail). She writes: "Fur would appear to be a multi-layered object, sought after for both its desirability and profitability. As commodity fetish it fulfils the needs of a modernizing society. However, in the form of a libidinal fetish, it becomes an object which creates the desire for those needs." (Emberley, 1996, p.438) This complex movement of value is enacted, rather than explained, by Kafka.

would allow him to become fully animal. It is because of this cowardice in the face of absolute freedom that his sister turns against him since he cannot now give her a route of escape from the trap of the family. The woman in furs is similarly caught in the mere play-acting of being-animal. Her fur will never become real, just as the picture of her will remain a reproduction many times removed. It should not, however, be forgotten that it is the frame that is the product of Gregor's labour and that it is its glass that allows him to attach himself to the picture in the first place. In some ways, the picture is a mirror of Gregor. Just as she will not become animal by wearing fur, neither will Gregor become insect by taking on the carapace of the beetle. It is the frame, however, that allows the picture to exist just as Gregor's family gives him definition. Just as Gregor makes the frame for the picture, so someone or something else (the Other) makes the frame of the family for Gregor. While he may dream of escaping this by creating his own frame (by, possibly as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, imagining a family structure of brother-sister), he cannot give up his frame or his framing: he cannot fully deterritorialise. Deleuze and Guattari interpret the patriarchal apple that eventually kills Gregor as a representation of re-Oedipalisation – of a final becoming-human. They state that "he re-Oedipalizises himself through the apple that is thrown at him and has nothing to do but die, the apple buried in his back" (p. 15). It is significant that this is presented as an action on the part of Gregor rather than that father who throws the apple: "he re-Oedipalizes himself", he re-frames himself but as he is neither animal nor human he has no place but death. The meaning of the fur, just as the meaning of waking up to find oneself turned into a monstrous insect, is obscure.[34]

[34] In her wide-ranging article, "Kafka and Gender", Lorenz describes Gregor's encounter with the picture as "one of the many instances in Kafka's writing that masculinity or femininity are depicted in the absence of the appropriately gendered being" (p. 175). This is perhaps a bit unclear, but can be understood within

3.3 Apuleius and Anthropology

Kafka's story links itself through its title and subject matter to *The Metamorphosis*, more commonly known as *The Golden Ass* (*Asinus Aurelius*), written sometime after 155 AD by Lucius Apuleius who began his life at Madauros in the modern day Algeria. This text is often cited as the first prose novel[35] and charts the picaresque adventures of a certain Lucius who has the misfortune to be turned into a donkey through the misapplication of a female magician's ointment. The novel is filled with digressions and tales within tales but eventually Lucius manages to be transformed back into human form under the auspices of the goddess Isis, whose initiate and priest then becomes.

At the beginning of his adventures, Lucius, while still human, begins an affair with a slave-girl of the house at which he is a guest. When he first sees the girl, Fotis, he launches into a long and rapturous eulogy dedicated to the attraction of hair. He writes that: "Whenever I meet a pretty woman, the first thing that catches my eye is her hair; I make a careful mental picture of it to carry home and brood over in private." (p. 44: II, 8: Trans. Graves) Lucius proceeds to hyperbolise his adoration of long hair until "I could no longer endure the fierce torture of my

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Lorenz's broader contention that Kafka presents a fictional universe within which gender is a radical rather than normative concept. She claims that Kafka "de-essentialises humanness and species belonging" and that he "assumes no categorical distinction on the basis of species". She goes on to argue that in Kafka "gender and species are operative as positions of power and dominance rather than as qualitative differences" (p. 186). For Lorenz, these positions are always imposed rather than immanent and thus when Gregor moves beyond the law, which he can never fully escape without risking total annihilation, but is nevertheless destroyed. Gregor is the logic of what Lorenz calls "the unreality of appearances [and] the unreality of reality" (p. 186). This also links to Žižek's analysis of ideology (see below).

[35] "More than any other literary form, more perhaps than any other type of writing, the novel serves as the model by which society conceives of itself, the discourse in and through which it articulates the world" (Culler, 1975, p. 189).

extreme pleasure. I leaned over her, and implanted the sweetest of honeyed kisses where her hair reached the crown of her head" (II, 10: trans. Walsh). Lucius, during this disquisition on hair, becomes overwhelmed by the negative image of a woman who might shave her head:

> But - and here you must excuse a horrible idea which I hope nobody will ever put into practice - if you shaved the head of even the most beautiful woman alive and so deprived her face of its natural setting, then I don't care whether she originally floated down from Heaven, and was reborn from sea-foam like the Goddess Venus - I don't even care whether she were Venus herself, with every one of the Graces and Cupids in attendance, Venus dripping with precious balsam and fragrant as cinnamon, and with the famous girdle of love clasped around her waist - the fact is, that her baldness would leave her completely without attraction even for so devoted a husband as the God Vulcan. (p. 45: II, 8. Trans. Graves)[36]

The appearance of Venus in this context will become increasingly significant as we continue. Hair within Roman culture and religion was accorded a significant role in the initiation rites of young men into adulthood (see Juvenal Satire III, lines 181-189: "The beloved of one is having his beard, of another his hair cut") where the first clippings of a young man's beard were taken and dedicated to the gods and then ceremonially burnt along with certain toys and symbols of childhood.

A little later on in *The Golden Ass*, Fotis relates how she had been entreated by her mistress, Pamphile, a sorceress, to collect young men's hair from the barber's so that it could be used to animate an odd collection of human limbs and animal parts (III, 17-18). Thus in addition to Lucius' erotic attachment to women's hair, the material has also the further significance of being associated with magic and power.

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[36] The most comprehensive and scholarly commentary on hair in *The Golden Ass* is Englert and Long's "Functions of Hair in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*" (1973).

At the point of Lucius' transformation, as he is expecting to become an owl, "All that happened was that the hair on [my arms] grew coarser and coarser and the skin toughened into hide. [...] The only consoling part of this miserable transformation was the enormous increase in the size of my member" (p.50: III, 24: trans. Graves/Grant). This description of metamorphosis links the thickening of hair to the enlargement of Lucius' penis and once again reinforces the libidinal aura surrounding hair and fur.

It is significant that the image of the ass was associated with Seth, the Egyptian god who was the enemy of Isis and Osiris. Lucius adopts the image of Isis' hated enemy for most of his adventures until Isis herself delivers him (and perhaps even herself) from the destructive threat of the ass.

Many of the ensuing adventures that Lucius has as an ass involve lewdness and desire, culminating in his escape from an amphitheatre where he is supposed to have had intercourse with a condemned woman for the delectation of the crowd. Upon his escape he makes his way to the sea where the goddess Isis, who is often linked with Venus both in this text and elsewhere, appears to him and instructs him as to how he might escape his enchantment. This is part of her description:

> Her long thick hair fell in tapering ringlets on her divine neck and was crowned with an intricate chaplet in which was woven every kind of flower. In the middle of her brow shone a round disc, like a mirror, or like the bright light of the moon, which told me who she was. Vipers curving upwards to left and right supported this disk, with ears of grain bristling beside them. (p.182: X, 3: trans. Graves)

The agent of his deliverance combines both his ideal of erotic desire as well as the magical aspect of hair. Lucius is later transformed and in gratitude becomes a priest of Isis. After a number of levels of initiation he becomes a

celibate priest (*pastophorus*) of Isis and of Osiris, her brother and lover, with this final symbolic gesture:

> So I had my head completely shaved once more, and gladly performed the duties of that most ancient college, founded as long ago as the days of Sulla. I did not cover or conceal my bald head, but sported it openly wherever I went. (X, 30: Trans. Walsh)

Thus Lucius undergoes a transformation into a beast completely covered with hair and on returning to his usual form begins by denying his sexuality (and thus, presumably, forgetting his intense attraction to women's hair) and, in a gesture which is both conventional and intensely personal, shaves his own head to become an echo of that unthinkable thing, the bald woman.

In his rejection of his sexuality he takes on the appearance not only of the religious ascete but that of his own personal vision of absolute horror and sexual repulsion. Lucius' action betrays a desire to be that which he deems almost unthinkable. John J. Winkler argues that the text of *The Golden Ass* contains an "unresolved ambiguity" which is "caught in the image of the shaven head" (p.227). He traces this image back to its popular Roman double-meaning: either it is the mark of a religious devotee or it is the sign of a clown or mime artist (*stupidus*) (pp.225-6). Winkler writes of Lucius' final act:

> Those readers who are inclined to share with sympathy Lucius's commitment to his dreams and his priests will have no problem with his bold, almost defiant and obviously joyous display of his naked head. Those other readers who are inclined to doubt the claims of priests and the business of shrines will find just as much justification in the *Asinus Aurelius* for their murmurs "What a fool this Lucius is". (pp.226-7)

He concludes by arguing that Apuleius "has made both responses possible" (p.227). It is however not so much a case of authorial intention imbuing the image with

ambiguity, but rather the ambiguous existence of the image that puts into play this undecideable movement of meaning.

What should be clear from this discussion is the complexity and mutability surrounding the fetishistic investment in hair and fur. For *The Golden Ass* it is this thread of ambiguous desire that seems to run throughout the text and bind it into something resembling those odd mourning relics so beloved of the Elizabethans and Victorians.[37]

It is the ambiguity that attaches itself to hair that has caused much debate within anthropological discussion over the past century. Debate crystallises around E.R. Leach's 1957 "Magical Hair" which is itself a discussion of Charles Berg's psychoanalytic monograph *The Unconscious Significance of Hair* (1951).

As we shall see, the issue at stake in this debate quickly moves away from the specific symbolic history associated with hair to the much broader question of the symbol itself within anthropological discourse. In exploring the various strands of this debate I hope to show that "hair" as such is unimportant within the discussion but that, rather, what is of importance is the status of hair as "symbol". Anthropology's anxiety surrounding hair addresses the very basis of anthropology itself. Just as Apuleius finds his entire life both threatened and protected by his

[37] See Gitter, Elizabeth G. "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination". *PMLA*. Vol. 99, October, 1984 (936-954) where she argues that a woman's hair was seen as both a symbol of attractiveness and of entrapment: "But always...the grand woman achieved her transcendent vitality partly through her magic hair, which was invested with independent energy: enchanting – and enchanted – her gleaming tresses both expressed her mythic power and were its source.. [...] Her resemblance to the spider has not been lost on writers who see that the web she weaves, whether of flax or hair, may be a mantrap rather than a tapestry of life" (p.936). Also Sleeman, Margaret. "Medieval Hair Tokens". *Forum for Modern Language Studies*. 17, 4 October 1981 (322-336): "The earliest periods in England for which there is much information about hair work are the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. Lockets, rings and bracelets were the most popular ways of displaying hair at this time, and the associations with love and bereavement were clearly present. Hair was cherished as a relic of the beloved in life or after death." (p. 325)

relationship to hair, so anthropology must be able to theorise the social significance of hair if it is to be able to analyse anything at all to do with society and culture. Thus hair, I will argue, forces anthropology to address the ambiguity of the symbol as such, and in so doing reveals an ambiguity at the very base of anthropology's desire to make the symbol legible. It is the illegibility of the symbol which marks it as a fetish or, perhaps, the fetishism of the symbol (the symbol's fetishism) which makes it illegible.

This debate about the meaning of hair is also about the difference between anthropology and psychoanalysis since both disciplines are interested in what objects mean to individuals and to society. While psychoanalysis takes the predilections of the individual psyche as its main area of study, anthropology sees the social world as its milieu and the individual as evidence in judging the accuracy of its broader social models. Leach writes:

> The social anthropologist ordinarily has little interest in the individual as such; his major concern is with individuals acting as members of groups. His unit of observation is not one human being in isolation but rather a "relationship" linking one individual to another within a wider social field. (Leach, 1958, p. 151)

However, Leach points out that the problem is not quite as simple as all that since when an anthropologist considers "symbolic behaviour", he or she comes across "an essentially psychological problem: Just where does the emotional content of symbols come from, and how is it that some symbols are more emotionally loaded than others?" (p. 147). This, in essence, is the entire problem of the debate surrounding the meaning of hair.

3.4 Hair and Psychoanalysis

> All margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. So also have bodily pairings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat. (Douglas, 1966, p. 121)

The discussion around the meaning of hair has been centred on a confrontation between anthropology and psychoanalysis and provides an exemplary opportunity to explore the ways in which these two different approaches to the same problem illuminate the shortcomings of each and point towards an understanding of meaning that goes beyond, perhaps, both disciplines. In her discussion of the taboo and the sacred, Douglas points out, in a way that Kristeva also explores in her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, that it is that which physically marks the limits of the self that comes to be marked with a particular significance. One of these elements is, of course, hair. It is in determining why hair should be invested with such cultural weight, that anthropologists and psychoanalysts have engaged in a debate since at least the late 19th century. While anthropology tries to discern the meaning of hair by looking at the way in which a culture interprets the use of the material, psychoanalysis takes the evidence of individual cases and extrapolates from these general rules about the function that the object has in society. The argument is fundamentally one of origins and, more specifically, of the role of the unconscious in determining social meaning. Anthropologists tend to be sceptical of claims for unconscious origins but, at the same time, find it difficult to suggest why something like hair seems to have

a fairly standard meaning (or use) in many cultures. However different these two approaches may at first appear, there is a surprising amount of convergence in their thinking which tends to end in a deadlock of uncertainty. In both anthropological and psychoanalytic descriptions I argue that fetishism, which is more explicitly part of the psychoanalytic approach, offers a way out of this impasse by explicitly positing the object (hair) as the boundary of meaning itself (just as Douglas and Kristeva argue that the abject, which is more boundary than object, functions). Giorgio Agamben's description of the fetish structure will be used to explore this idea of the fetish as the border between the conscious and the unconscious.

Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (originally published in 1886 and an early influence on Freud) describes five cases of hair "fetichism" (98-102, pp. 157-162) within a more general discussion of fetishism. Krafft-Ebing makes an explicit connection between the religious and sexual understanding of the term "fetishism":

> *Erotic* fetichism makes an idol of physical or mental qualities of a person or even merely of objects used by that person, etc., because they awaken mighty associations with the beloved person, thus originating strong emotions of sexual pleasure. Analogies with religious fetichism are always discernible; for, in the latter, the most insignificant objects (hair, nails, bones, etc.) become at times fetiches which produce feelings of delight and even ecstasy. (p. 11)

For Krafft-Ebing, the fetish object is a metonym for the loved object and it is only unhealthy when the single object replaces a more generalised fetishism. He quotes Max Dessoir (Ludwig Brunn) from "The Fetichism of Love":

> Normal love appears to us a symphony of tones of all kinds. It is roused by the most varied agencies. It is, so to speak, polytheistic. Fetichism recognizes only the tone-colour of a single instrument; it

> issues forth from a single motive; it is monotheistic. (p. 12)[38]

As is common in explanations of fetishism, the general structure of desire and love is seen as fetishistic but it is only seen as pathological when the object (rather than the aim) is not deemed to conform to a cultural definition of appropriate love object.[39] Ebing goes on to isolate some of the objects that seem to occur particularly frequently as fetish objects:

> A striking phenomenon in fetichism is that among the many things which may serve as fetiches there are some which gain that significance more than others; for instance, the HAIR, the HAND, the FOOT of woman, or the expression of the EYE. (p. 13)

He adds that "Beautiful hair is a powerful fetich for men" (p. 13) but does not elucidate why this should be the case (note that in this sentence Ebing ascribes beauty to hair in a way that makes its attractiveness seem natural to men – it is not surprising that hair easily becomes a fetish since it is clearly beautiful; or, put in another way, hair is intrinsically fetishistic). Ebing does not offer any explanation as to why "pathological fetichism" should manifest itself other than stating that it "seems to arise only on the basis of a psychopathic constitution that is for the most part hereditary, or on the basis of existent mental disease" (p. 145). He does, however, follow Alfred Binet, in accepting that "*in the life of every fetichist there may be assumed to have been some event which determined the association of lustful feeling with the single impression*" and that this event took place in "early youth" and "occurs in connection with the first awakening

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[38] Later Ebing writes: "Here the abnormality consists only in the fact that the whole sexual interest is concentrated on the impression made by a part of the person of the opposite sex, so that all other impressions fade and become more or less indifferent" (p. 144).

[39] Havelock Ellis comes to a similar conclusion: "It is important to remember that while erotic symbolism becomes fantastic and abnormal in its extreme manifestations, it is in its essence absolutely normal." ((*Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Vol. V, p. 8, quoted in Berg, 1951, p. 53)

of sexual life" (p. 145: italics in original). He classifies fetishism in three categories:

(a) The Fetich is a Part of the Female Body (p. 147)
(b) The Fetich is an Article of Female Attire (p. 162)
(c) The Fetich is Some Special Material (p. 176)

Hair fetishism falls within category (a) and is itself divided into three classes. The first of these merely involves "sensual impression" and, rather oddly, "incites to cohabitation". The next involves those whose "virility is only possible with a woman who possesses this individual fetich", while the last is:

> formed by those whom the hair of woman suffices even when severed from the body – so to speak, no longer a part of the living body, but only matter, even a mercantile article – to excite *libido* and sensual gratification by way of physical or psychical onanism, eventually by contact of the genitals with the fetich. (p. 157)

Throughout this discussion of fetichism, Ebing often refers to the fact that fetishism may lead to criminal acts since the fetishist may steal the objects for which he has such an affection. He claims that "it not uncommonly happens that the fetichist seeks to possess himself of woman's hair by unlawful acts" (p. 158) and makes an easy link between sexual "perversion" and criminality (it is not surprising that he refers to Cesare Lombroso as a source for understanding fetishism).

Nevertheless, throughout Ebing's explanation for hair fetishism, and fetishism in general, is the putative existence of an early sexual encounter in which the fetish object gains significance. This object of choice itself, however, remains fairly arbitrary:

> Experience shows that chance controls in a large measure this mental association [of object with sexual emotion], that the nature of the fetich varies

> with the personality of the individual, thus arousing the oddest sympathies or antipathies. (p. 12)

Karfft-Ebing's discussion of hair and its meaning is descriptive rather than analytical. Perhaps the most sustained discussion of the significance of hair within a psychological context is Charles Berg's 1951 *The Unconscious Significance of Hair*. The project of this book is to claim that hair and the behaviours surrounding hair are explainable through the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious and through a Freudian understanding of the constitution of the human subject. Berg considers most contemporary hair care customs to be entirely irrational and is particularly shocked by the thirty million pounds "spent by women on permanent waving alone" (p. 5 and, again, p. 7). Since he sees absolutely no reason for such wastefulness he regards the immense amount of effort expended on hair to be a clear sign of the existence of an unconscious motivation. He sees general societal attitudes as the result of individual (if unconscious) motives.

Apart from his own cases, Berg takes as two of his main sources Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* and Havelock Ellis' *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (especially volume V), both of which explicitly relate hair and fetishism. Berg notes:

> Havelock Ellis regards hair as the most common and important *fetish* and as a possible link of transition between the bodily origin of fetishism and its more remote objects such as animals and stuffs. (p. 28)

According to Berg, Ellis describes the veneration of hair in terms of it being a boundary element in Douglas' sense and thus allowing the fetishist to use hair as a conduit of some sort to the world outside the body. Berg also comments on Krafft-Ebing:

> The theory of the mental mechanism whereby hair in certain instances assumes such an all-important role as a fetishistic sexual object begins with Krafft

> Ebing's commonsense deduction that fetishism proceeds from some early, possibly infantile, association of an object (any object) with the sexually desired object or person. The emphasis is as it were switched from the original sexual object on to the associated substitute. The substitute then survives while the original sexual object is forgotten. (p. 66)

It is Berg, however, who attempts to explain the existence of hair fetishism in a more rigorous manner through his reading of Freud.[40] In a note early in his text, Berg gives the following summary of how he understands fetishism:

> Psycho-analysis has shown us that a fetish is always (a) a phallic symbol, (b) a castrated phallus and (c) the mother's phallus. (n. 4, p. 28)

This is a fairly standard reading of Freud's formulation of the fetish and Berg applies the schema faithfully to his understanding of hair. He explains that the boy's "original sexual object" is "the phallus presumed to be possessed by his mother" and, classically, when he discovers that this phallus does not exist, he protects himself from the implied possibility of his own castration by deciding that the "last object" perceived before this moment, "commonly clothing or hair", is the "sought-for and insisted upon phallus". Hair is therefore a recurring fetish because it happens to be near the supposed place of initial trauma. Berg also highlights the possible aggressive dimension of this process:

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[40] It should also be noted that Berg does propose hair to be in some way biologically linked to sexuality, not merely as a secondary sexual characteristic, but as an intrinsic part of the economy of sex. Using a crude physics model, he understands hair to be a conversion of sexual energy. He quotes Géza Róheim from *The international Journal of Psycho-Analysis* (Vol. XIII, parts 1 & 2, pp. 94-95): "As a prototype of all transformations to which the libido becomes subjected in the course of its long history…stags and lions grow antlers and manes (hair) in the rutting period *because the surplus of libidinal energy recedes back from the genital organ to the whole body*" (Berg, 1951, p. 50). There is a tendency to support the cultural understanding of hair as sexual with an induced biological link between sexual potency and hair (see Cooper, above).

> At the same time the aggressive elements of his sexual instinct included the impulse to perform this castration […]; hence the hair-despoiling and hair-cutting element so frequently present. (p. 67)[41]

Berg, however, does later attempt to determine more carefully why it is hair that is so often chosen "for the symbolic expression of [sexual] conflict" and first explains that hair is a "convenient and suitable symbolic object" for three possible reasons:

> (1) Hair is freely admitted to consciousness; indeed it cannot easily be ignored by consciousness.
> (2) It is a part of us and yet not a part. It is detachable removable, cutable, etc. We can innocently play with it. It is visible socially to our fellows.
> (3) The sexual conflict is not limited to hair in its symbolic expression. A host of other objects can be, and are, freely chosen for its expression or relief. They are cathected by the unconscious in proportion to their convenience and representative ability; e.g. finger and toe nails, hats, shoes, clothes, umbrellas, purses, jewellery, etc. (objects detachable from our person). The process reminds us of that to which Freud alludes in describing dream mechanisms. Some *recent* object or experience is chosen to manifest the repressed latent thoughts. Hair is always with us — always recent. (pp. 90-91)

Secondly, he points out that "hair is a secondary sexual character in so far as it develops in special regions […] coincident with genital maturation" (p. 91). Thus hair is both symbolically convenient and physically associated with sexual maturity. These two properties together make hair more likely to be fetishised than umbrellas or purses. Berg ends his monograph rather dramatically with an emphasis on the inevitability of castration:

> And so our preoccupation with the unsolved primitive past has found its way into our modern civilised life, in a form which, by virtue of its symbolism, ensures it against any likelihood of solution. We call this normality: to go on repeating our old struggles with obsessional persistence until death

[41] This "tendency" is satirised in Švankmajer's *Spiklenci Slasti* (1996).

> overtakes us and ends the matter with a final castration. (p. 94)

Berg sees the psycho-sexual symbolism associated with hair as the expression of an essential existential problematic. Life is predicated on the possibility of death and it is in the split between the two (in castration itself) that meaning is given to both life and death. It is perhaps this more metaphysical part of Berg's analysis that has been overlooked in later criticisms of this rigorous work.

It should be clear that Berg's analysis of the *unconscious* significance of hair, while ostensibly based on individual perceptions of this significance, is more interested in the possible origins for hair's use as a symbol more generally. Cooper misses the point somewhat by complaining that "there seems little of the 'unconscious' in this kind of display" and that "although Dr. Berg's arguments may hold good for his patients and perhaps for other inhibited or sexually repressed people, the great majority of us quite consciously accept the sexual significance of hair" (Cooper, 1971, p. 46). Hair behaviour is overtly sexualised but it is not the understanding of this that Berg claims is unconscious, but rather the *origins* of this sexualisation itself. It is this problem of the origin of the sexual importance of hair that anthropologists explicitly tackle in this debate since they are explicitly interested in the social rather than the individual.

3.5 Anthropology and Hair

There is a clear line in the debate surrounding hair in anthropology running from Edmund Leach's review of Berg's book, "Magical Hair" (1958), to the essays collected by Alf Hiltbeitel and Barbara D. Miller in *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures* (1998). It is in Patrick Olivelle's "Hair and Society: Social Significance of Hair in South Asian Cultures" that this discussion is most explicitly addressed in terms of the way in which anthropology has investigated the symbolic significance of hair. Olivelle gives a succinct literature review that will be useful to reconsider with reference to some of the original texts. He also goes on to provide a possible new reading of hair significance that, I will argue, is far closer to Berg's approach than Olivelle acknowledges. The distinction between the anthropological and psychoanalytic approaches collapses because it is finally impossible to make a distinction between public and private, social and psychological, conscious and unconscious. It is this impossibility, marked by the process of disavowal, that is the space of the fetish.

Olivelle begins by acknowledging James Frazer's work on hair ritual in *The Golden Bough* (Chapter 21, §6-8,1922). Frazer makes a connection between the sacredness of the head and the importance of hair in various cultures:

> When the head was considered so sacred that it might not even be touched without grave offence, it is obvious that the cutting of the hair must have been a delicate and difficult operation. (Frazer, 2000, online)

Olivelle criticises Frazer for using any number of examples from around the world and from various times since these are used "without regard either to the accuracy of description or to the social and cultural context within which those customs are located" (Olivelle, 1998, p. 32). In addition, Frazer is seen to merely follow the

interpretations of these rituals provided by the culture of origin itself. There is no meta-criticism.

Olivelle then goes on to divide the approaches to hair interpretation into the psychological and the sociological (I have been calling these the psychoanalytic and the anthropological) and briefly summarises Leach's "Magical Hair" as "neatly dividing symbols into private and public" (p. 33), with the private being in the realm of psychoanalysis and the public in that of anthropology. Leach's article is an extended discussion of Berg's book and he is primarily interested in countering Berg's assertion that hair has a universal, Freudian significance. He argues that it is not possible to make broad generalisations based on individual testimonies and that it is imprudent to make any cross-cultural judgements about the significance of symbolic rituals or habits. However, Leach acknowledges a fundamental dilemma in that the anthropological evidence available on hair ritual seems to corroborate Leach's Freudian interpretation. He writes:

> Even the most sceptical anthropologist must admit that head hair is rather frequently employed as a public symbol with an explicitly sexual significance, but many would argue that this connection between hair and sexuality is accidental. They would claim too that hair, even as a sex symbol, is used in different ways. (p. 153)

Leach believes in a strict cultural relativism that assumes the possibility of absolute difference between unrelated cultures. In this view there is no reason to assume that any meaningful object or behaviour in one society will be meaningful in the same way in any other society. The niggling point is that hair appears to be cross-culturally relevant. He admits that:

> an astonishingly high proportion of the ethnographic evidence fits the following pattern in a quite obvious way. In ritual situations: long hair = unrestrained sexuality; short hair or partially

> shaved head or tightly bound hair = restricted sexuality; close shaven head = celibacy. (p.154)

Leach is correct in pointing out the fallacy of such inductive reasoning: just because many cultures appear to give similar significance to hair does not necessarily mean that there is any link between the ways in which these symbols are understood. However, it is evident that, on the material available to Leach, "head hair is widely used as a ritual symbol with genital and anal connotations" but Leach vigorously opposes the idea that this congruence might be unconscious:

> This symbolism is not unconscious, it is the exact reverse. In contrast to Dr Berg it may be argued that it is precisely because hair behaviour embraces a *widely understood* set of conscious sexual symbolizations that it plays such an important part in rituals of a *rites de passage* type which involve the formal transfer of an individual from one social-sexual status to another. (p.157: emphasis in original)

For Leach, this ubiquity stems not from some personal inner motivation, but from the obvious, "widely understood" connotations of hair. The meaning of hair must come, in some way, from hair itself and not from the unconscious; although it may be relevant that the two approaches result in very similar conclusions. The exact status of this relevance, however, cannot be determined.

The next discussion of this issue comes in 1969 with C. R. Hallpike's "Social Hair", in which he explicitly addresses the problem of "common signification in different cultures" for which he gives two reasons:

> The first is that the meanings ascribed to symbols are related to the workings of the subconscious, which are assumed to be similar in members of every culture and, more specifically, to the mechanisms of the repression and sublimation of the sexual impulses. (p. 256)

Hallpike's use of the term "subconscious", as opposed to "unconscious", here distances him somewhat from strict Freudian psychoanalysis and is deliberately left vague. He does nevertheless assume that some "mechanisms" are universal and would therefore be found in all cultures (even if their specifics may differ). His second explanation is more pragmatic:

> given the common concern of all societies with survival, the nature of the physical environment, procreation, the social role of the sexes, youth and age, order and disorder, and similar basic concepts, there are certain symbols and symbolic acts which are inherently appropriate in expressing these concepts, and that this is why these symbols are so commonly found and often have the same meaning in different cultures. (p. 256)

Since Hallpike assumes that some concepts are universal (that there is no absolute relativism of culture), there must therefore exist "inherently appropriate" symbols that will be common to all cultures. This, of course, begs the question as to the origin of these universal concepts and whether, in fact, these "common concerns" are true of all societies at all times. It is not surprising that Hallpike is able to offer a fairly straightforward explanation of the significance of hair since he believes in the existence of such an explanation outside of the local structures of any single society. He does not however presume to explain the mental origin of such explanations. He argues that there is "no reason why a theory of hair in ritual should be obliged to reduce all manifestations of hair to a single origin – symbolic castration" since hair is, by its very nature, "very appropriate, like dress, for expressing changes or differences in ritual or social status" (p. 256). It is this assumption of a proper meaning inherent to the object that leads Hallpike to his central hypothesis that:

> long hair is associated with being outside of society and that the cutting of hair symbolises re-entering society, or living under a particularly disciplinary regime within society. (p.260)

Or even more succinctly: "cutting the hair equals social control" (p. 261). Hallpike rejects any unconscious explanation for the significance of hair but, as Olivelle points out, "never shows why hair and only hair has become almost universally a powerful symbol of the relationship between individuals and society" (1998, p. 33). In addition, Hallpike's empirical evidence is suspect since "identification of the shaven head and the ordinary cutting of hair and grouping them together under the category of social control and discipline are unconvincing; the evidence points in a different direction" (Olivelle, 1998, p. 34). Hallpike tries to underpin his initial tautological pragmatism (hair is significant because hair is significant) with a universal explanation of this significance (cutting of hair = social control) but, unfortunately, the evidence to support this broad claim does not exist.

Duncan Derret's "Religious Hair" (1973) does not enter into the debate around hair and meaning explicitly but is a commentary on the translation of 1 Corinthians II: 2-16[42]

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[42] [2] Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.
[3] But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.
[4] Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head.
[5] But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.
[6] For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.
[7] For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man.
[8] For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man.
[9] Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.
[10] For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels.

which explains that women's hair should be covered because of "its universal acceptance as a sign of sexual attractiveness" and that if a woman were to go into public with her head uncovered this would bring shame on her husband (p. 101). It will not be necessary to explore the contradictions of this biblical passage in more detail, but it is nevertheless of interest that Paul must be so vehement in the outlining of the strictures surrounding hair and religious observance.

In "Hair, Sex and Dirt" (1974), Hershman disagrees with Hallpike in much the same way that Olivelle does "because Hallpike is putting forward the rather unlikely proposition that hair behaviour has precisely the same meaning in every culture" (p. 291). Hershman is much more sympathetic to Berg's psychoanalytic position and claims:

> So it is my hypothesis that in its symbolic usage hair gains its power through its equivalence with the genital organs in the individual Punjabi subconscious but that it is then culturally employed in ritual, in co-ordination with other symbols, as means of communicating certain essential values of Punjabi society. (p. 274)

For Hershman, the original significance of hair comes from some form of unconscious (and by this he seems to mean "primal") association with genitality and that Punjabi society then engages with this prior meaning in a variety of ways. Olivelle criticises Hershman in the following manner: "A theory of hair must address the problem of their [emotive and symbolic power] connection: how is the

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[11] Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord.
[12] For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of god.
[13] Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?
[14] Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?
[15] But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.
[16] But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God. (King James Version).

socially accepted message related to the original unconscious symbolism of hair?" (p. 34). It is the relation between the conscious and the unconscious that is at stake for Olivelle.[43]

Olivelle's solution is to find a third category that mediates between public and private symbols ("Leach's watertight division" (1998, p. 34)). He discovers this in Gananath Obeyesekere's definition of "psychogenetic symbols".

> Psychogenetic symbols *originate* in the unconscious or are derived from the dream repertoire; but the origin of the symbols must be analytically separated from its ongoing operational significance. This is often the case in myths and rituals: symbols originating from unconscious sources are used to give expression to meanings that have nothing to do with their

[43] In the article "History and Anthropology" (1949), reproduced in *Structural Anthropology* (1968), Lévi-Strauss claims that history and ethnology "differ, principally, in their choice of complementary perspectives: History organizes its data in relation to conscious expressions of social life, while anthropology proceeds by examining its unconscious foundations" (p. 18; Culler, 1975, p. 40). In the debate around hair it is clear that many of the anthropologists would disagree with Lévi-Strauss in this regard and would place themselves more in his category of "history" than of "ethnology". Lévi-Strauss uses the word "unconscious" to correspond to Saussure's *langue*, the system that underlies surface *parole*. He argues that "the unconscious activity of the mind consists in imposing forms upon content, and if these forms are fundamentally the same for all minds – ancient and modern, primitive and civilized (as the study of the symbolic function, expressed in language, so strikingly indicates) – it is necessary and sufficient to grasp the unconscious structure underlying each institution and each custom, in order to obtain a principle of interpretation valid for other institutions and other customs, provided of course that the analysis is carried far enough" (p. 21). He imagines that there is a universal form that reflects the essential structure of the human mind. However, he complicates this position in a slightly later essay, "Linguistics and Anthropology" (1953 [1968]), when he discusses the relationship between language and culture, which he divides into three possibilities:

- language is "a reflection of the total culture"
- language is "a *part* of culture"
- language is "the *condition* of culture" (p. 68)

Pushing the third definition to its limit, Lévi-Strauss sees that language might lay down "a kind of foundation for the more complex structures which correspond to the different aspects of culture" (pp. 69). The "unconscious" structure of language is the structure of culture as such. This, however, begs the question as to the origin of language itself – where does this structure come from? This question is not answerable from within the structure.

> origin. (Obeyesekere, 1981, pp. 13-14 quoted in Olivelle, 1998, pp. 34-35).

The psychogenetic symbol is thus brought to the attention of the public sphere by its original private importance but once it has entered the social realm there is no stable meaning to which this symbol must adhere. In her "Hairdos and Don'ts: Hair Symbol and Sexual History" (1994), Mageo also uses this idea of psychogenesis. She explains:

> Symbols begin psychogenetically; they are assimilated by the group for communicative purposes, cultural symbols may then be used to express private complexes or personal resistance to social morality. (p. 427)

While finding this a useful solution to the problem, Olivelle complains that Obeyesekere's schema sees the origin of all meaning to be in the unconscious and calls this the "monogenesis" of symbols. Olivelle contends that "some symbols, including hair, are polygenetic – they originate from a multiplicity of sources." (p. 35) In terms of hair he lists three possible sources for the origin of its meaning:

1. "In humans there is a clear and visible association between the growth of body hair […] and the onset of puberty and sexual maturity" and that "this is a developmental feature unique to human beings."
2. Probably linked to the first we find "the unconscious association between head hair and sexuality". Olivelle argues that this is not necessarily linked to the psychoanalytic interpretation head=penis.
3. "The third source is the biological fact that hair and nails are unique among body parts in that they grow continuously and they grow back when cut." (p. 36)

He then defines the "root meaning" of hair as "sexual maturity" (p. 37). In many ways, this is not at all different from Berg's two main explanations for the significance of hair. First, that it is a "convenient and suitable symbolical object" and that, second, "it develops in special regions (the face, pubes, etc.) coincident with genital maturation" (Berg, 1951, pp. 90-91). We see that in

the end there does not seem to be all that much difference between Berg's original psychoanalytic explanation and Olivelle's more contemporary re-thinking of the problem. In this particular debate, neither discipline adequately accounts for the sexual significance that is given to hair by many societies other than stating that this is indeed the case and that this is probably most closely related to hair's visible connection with the onset of puberty.

At the beginning of his article Olivelle claims that there is "no single and unique meaning to be discovered within this vast range of hair rituals" (p. 31) but eventually arrives at the compromise "root" meaning of "sexual maturity". Mageo concludes that hair, "as a symbol, is part of a social communication about gender roles and moral rules, but these messages bear upon the inner individual, particularly when they become tangled and confused" (1994, p. 427). It must also be that the "inner individual" has some effect on "social communication". In effect, we return to the cybernetic loop we saw in our discussion of Peirce's theory of the sign.

Olivelle provides a summary of Berger and Luckman's formulation of this in their *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967):

> [A]ll cultural creations, including the human body, have a dialectic nature. On the one hand, it is a human product, and is continuously changed and recreated by human activity. On the other hand, culture stands against the individual as a reality that imposes its own logic on individual consciousness, even though cultural grammars, just as those of languages, are very elastic, and individuals continuously change them in the process of using them. (p. 12)

For Olivelle this implies that hair symbolism has a "grammar" of its own which any individual must follow if he or she is to be understood by the rest of society. This, of course, is a version of Saussure's *langue*, but he also

points out that "the grammar of this symbol is not rigid" and that "individual uses will, over time change the very grammar of the symbol" (p. 12). *Parole* thus has the capacity to alter *langue.* This capacity is however limited, Olivelle would appear to argue, by the "root meaning" of the symbol chosen for the task of signification. It would appear to be impossible, however, to absolutely come to an understanding of what this "root meaning" might be since meaning is not essential to an object but rather comes from its place within a broader structure of significance.

It is this concept of the "broader structure" that Derrida addresses in "Signature Event Context" (1990). He writes:

> Every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written [...], in a small or large unit, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. (p. 12)

Derrida argues that for a sign to be a sign it must be *iterable* (quotable in a different context), but that this "does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any centre or absolute anchorage [*ancrage*]" (p. 12). To put this in Saussurian terms, it must be possible to take any element of *parole* and move it into a different *langue*, but since the meaning of *parole* is dependent on *langue*, *parole's* meaning would then necessarily be different within its new context (*langue*). What becomes clear from Derrida's formulation here is that context is both internal and external to the sign: without context the sign is meaningless but the sign, in order to exist, must presuppose context. No sign without context, no context without sign. This points to the impossibility of the existence of a closed system. The implication of this for the significance of hair is that hair must have a "root meaning" (as Olivelle argues) but that that "root" will

change depending on the context within which hair is meaningful.

What we should also learn from this long debate about meaning in culture is that it is often unclear exactly what question is being asked by the researcher and exactly what the point of understanding hair behaviour might be. Culler, commenting on Lévi-Strauss, writes:

> The notion that in studying a corpus one can discover the grammar or logic of a system through the division and comparison of forms may lead to a neglect of the basic problem of determining precisely what is to be explained. (p. 49)]

The basic problem of meaning itself seems fairly quickly answered: while sign and context are inextricably linked it is impossible to absolutely separate the two and one must finally rely on concepts such as *différance* (Derrida) or the real (Lacan) that are, to some extent, metaphors for the impossible origin of the difference between sign and context. It is the argument of this thesis that the fetishistic structure of disavowal (*Verleugnung*), which allows the simultaneous existence of two conflicting theses (there is a phallus, there is no phallus), is the structure of reality itself: the sign can exist outside of its context, the sign cannot exist outside of its context. Both propositions must be simultaneously true.

Giorgio Agamben comments on the productive potential of the fetish that Freud did not himself explore:

> Given that Freud was simply attempting to trace the phenomenon of fetishism to the unconscious processes that constituted its origin, we cannot be surprised that he did not unduly preoccupy himself with the consequences that the ambiguity of the infantile *Verleugnung* might have on the status of the fetish object, or that he neglected to put this object into relation to the other objects that make up the world of human culture insofar as it is an activity that creates objects. (pp. 32-33)

It is disavowal that allows for the production of meaning and must therefore be the logic of all meaning as such. For anthropology and for psychoanalysis this means that the attempt to define the meaning of any single symbol, such as hair, is doomed to failure since the meaning of the symbol will be ultimately contradictory.

However, if, as Olivelle and others argue, the significance of a symbol can change over time (via the cybernetic loop operating within an open system), then it is perhaps of interest to consider those symbolic cases that push at the edges of permissible or comprehensible meaning and that in this straining allow for change to occur. Every iteration of a symbol will in some minuscule way change the relationship between sign and context (as well as the sign and the context) but there are some iterations that challenge the structure in a way that forces more extreme changes, if not the most extreme change: the movement into a different economy of thought that is the impossible goal of deconstruction.

If this is indeed the case, then perhaps it should be clearer why we have been considering the peculiar conflations of hair and fur, animal and human that occur in Kafka and Apuleius. Neither of these authors present a straightforward "hair behaviour" but rather explore the very ends of the meaning of hair. Apuleius' invocation of the figure of Venus/Isis allows us to link forward to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1870) in which the relationship between sexuality, hair and fur is explored in some depth.

3.6 Venus in Furs

The text begins with an anonymous narrator's dream in which he has an audience with Venus herself. He says to her: "You taught me the meaning of love. Worshiping [sic] you made me

forget two thousand years of history" (p.144) and she is described in terms that should by now be familiar to us:

> Her head was magnificent in spite of the stony, lifeless eyes, but this was the only part that I was able to see, for the sublime creature had wrapped her marble body in a great fur beneath which she was huddled like a shivering cat. (p.143)

Thus we have an immediate link between hair and fur and a metaphorical confusion between the animal and the human. The narrator tells the goddess that "Nothing could be more attractive to man than the idea of a beautiful tyrant...who insolently and inconsistently changes her favorite," to which she adds, "And wears furs" (p.146). After he awakes (a point at which Venus metamorphoses into the narrator's "tawny brown...Cossack" (p.147)), he relates this dream to his friend Severin whose apposite diary becomes the body text of *Venus in Furs*. Severin's room is filled with objects and pictures, one of him at the feet of a fur-clad mistress and also "a remarkably good copy of Titian's famous *Venus with the Mirror* which hangs in the Dresden art gallery" (p.149).

In fact, the version of the painting in Dresden is a copy of the original which is now located in the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Titian himself, like Hollar, had a certain penchant for erotically linking women and fur in some of his paintings (see for instance his *Girl in a Fur Wrap* (mid-1530s) which is in Vienna and of which Sacher-Masoch may well have been aware). In *Venus with the Mirror* (1555) Titian shows Venus admiring herself in a mirror held by a cherub, while another reaches up to crown her with a leaf garland. Her hair is blonde and elaborately fixed with pearls and curls. The top of her body is naked, but her lower half is covered by a red embroidered velvet coat or cloak that has a thick trimming of brown fur. Mary Pardo describes the painting thus:

> The Washington *Venus* is partially nude: A fur-lined, wine-red velvet cloak is draped over her lower body and slides off her right shoulder. Her right hand, in a modified *pudica* gesture, crosses her torso and grasps an edge of the cloak, burying the fingers in the brown fur of the lining. (Pardo, 1997, p. 122)

Pardo adds: "But this is not exclusively her cloak" (p. 122). An x-ray of the painting, reproduced in the National Gallery's *Titian: Prince of Painters* (1990, pp. 302-304; Pardo, 1997, p. 123) reveals another painting beneath the *Venus*. This painting is at 90° to the normally visible one and depicts a young couple. The man stands to the right and behind the woman. He is looking directly at her while she has her head turned towards him but is looking off to the right. What is particularly interesting about this x-ray evidence is that the fur cloak that envelops Venus is now seen to be originally the man's coat which Titian incorporated into the second painting. Thus the cloak, with which Venus covers herself, is in fact the coat of a man that reaches out from behind to envelope her. So is reversed the traditional image of men being ensnared by women's hair.[44]

The Masochistic (to use a much abused adjective) male yearns for a sadistic woman who paradoxically, as Gilles Deleuze in his essay "Coldness and Cruelty" points out:

> enjoys hurting and torturing others, but it is significant that her actions are prompted by a man or otherwise performed in concert with a man, whose victim she is always liable to become. (1991, p.48)

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[44] See Elizabeth Gitter's "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination" (1984) or compare Pope's lines from "The Rape of the Lock":

> Love in these Labyrinths his Slaves detains,
> And mighty Hearts are held in Slender Chains. (II, 22-23)

Pardo also makes a plea for "imaginative readings" based on this coincidence: "But [Titian's] practical choice need not preclude more imaginative readings of this particular figure of love – rising, as it were, from the obliteration of an amorous couple, taking with her the male companion's garment and preserving, through all these metamorphoses (that spawned as a pair of Cupids and a doubled, but halved, image of the goddess), the oblique grain of the canvas support, which shapes the ridges of shimmering paint" (1997, p. 122).

Thus the woman whose hair enraptures and captures is merely allowed to do so by the willing submission of the man. What at first appears to be an image of power becomes one of subjugation.

As Masoch's wife in *The Confessions of Wanda von Sacher-Masoch* continually points out, although Sacher-Masoch greatly desired to be dominated, she could only do so with his permission and she herself had no desire to do so in the first place. Wanda's confession is remarkable in that it displays quite open contempt for Masoch's charades, often referring to the scenes of masochistic play as "comedy". But finally Wanda von Sacher-Masoch (and even her name is derived from her husband) expels Masoch from her life and writes:

> *Free*! Delivered from the torments of ten years! Finally to belong to myself again! Never again to don a fur, never again to hold a whip, and never again to hear a word spoken about the Greek!
>
> Like a heavy armor worn for long years which had constrained the natural movements of my body and threatened to deform me, the burden fell from my shoulders, I had to pause and sit down in order to calmly and completely savor the joy of that moment, and the satisfaction of having done it. (1990, p.107)

And in a way this echoes Lucius' own joy when finally "My bestial features faded away [and] the rough hair fell from my body":

> When I saw what had happened to me I stood rooted to the ground with astonishment and could not speak for a long while, my mind unable to cope with so great and sudden a joy. (p.188: X, 14: Trans. Graves/Grant)

For both Lucius and for Wanda there is this brief moment of silence within which the loss of their burdens of fur brings deliverance. Both of them are saved from the tyranny of significance and of signification. Both are now able to return to and embrace obscurity since it is no longer

necessary to signify. Englert and Long comment on the ending of *The Golden Ass*:

> What happens to his *flavum et inadfectatum capillitium* [neat blonde hair] is a symbol of Lucius' recovery and entry into a new life of denial and devotion. He had been held to Photis by her hair, at once symbol and paragon of her sexual enticements; freed from sensual bondage, he is freed also from what was the prinicipal feature of his earlier condition: his obsession with hair. His lack of concern for the ironically transferred loss of his own blonde locks is a symbol of the total release gained from his earlier vices. (1973, p. 239)

A quote from John Webster's Jacobean play *The Duchess of Malfi* in some way captures the ambiguity surrounding the discourse of hair, fur, desire and gender difference: where outward appearances and inward desires are not what they seem and that, like language, these signs continually change and metamorphose into their seeming opposites. And as is obvious from Sigmund Freud's formulation of the fetish: that which we desire we also fear.

> Said he was a wolf: only the difference
> Was, a wolf's skin was hairy on the outside,
> His on the inside. (V, ii, 16-18)

It is also clear that there is no easy difference between inside and outside, public and private or even past and present.

Chapter 4: Deformity and Fetishism in Kafka's Writing

> Take me, take me, web of folly and pain (Kafka, July 6, 1916: 1999, p. 365)
>
> For in what any words really originate, toward what they signal, are things he seems to have placed forever out of reach. (Thorlby, 1987, p. 40)

It is obvious that the writings of Franz Kafka are fascinated with women. Many of his letters are directly addressed to women; he often discusses his relationships with women and women feature centrally, although are often discussed peripherally, in his fictional work, particularly the novels.[45] In this chapter I wish to focus closely on the way in which women are represented in *The Trial*. More specifically, I wish to show how the text's fetishisation of female deformity is informed by and informs the construction of the entire text. Perhaps, someone may say (although they could be telling lies), that the evidence presented here is not sufficient or that the argument refers to texts which Kafka himself could not possibly have read. It may be necessary to remind this imaginary accuser of Advocate Huld's (reported) advice to another accused person:

> K. must remember that the proceedings were not public; […]. Naturally, therefore, the legal records of the case, and above all the actual charge sheets, were inaccessible to the accused and his counsel, consequently one did not know with any precision, what charges to meet in the first plea; accordingly it could be only by pure chance that it contained really relevant matter. (Kafka, 1999, p. 128)

Jacques Derrida warns of any attempt to elucidate a text with the help of an *objective* science or "pure story, or story without story" (Derrida, 1992, p. 209) since any such supposed objectivity or scientificity must be as fictitious

[45] A thorough overview of the way in which Kafka writes generally about sexual difference is provided by Lorenz (2002). Lorenz's basic argument is that in their representation of gender "Kafka's texts do not merely mirror these circumstances [of turn of the century Prague], they examine them critically" (2002, p. 170).

as the literary text on which commentary is being made. Thus, in using Sigmund Freud's theory of fetishism to discuss Kafka, I will be comparing *texts* and not systems of knowledge – systems which supposedly precede the textuality of the sign. It is this very textuality (or significance) that comes to constitute, and also to be constituted by, the notion of fetishism which will be explored here.

Throughout *The Trial* almost every woman who appears is marked by some seemingly inconsequential bodily deformity and it is this deformity that comes to embody the economy of desire that determines the functioning of the law in the novel – the logic of the law is the same as the logic of this deformity. On learning that Josef K. has been called before the court, Fräulein Bürstner says: "A court of law has a certain attraction, hasn't it?" (Kafka, 1999b, p. 33) and it is women that appear to offer hope of access to the remote court (just as women always offer the character K. the possibility of accessing the castle in *The Castle*).

It seems that no final authority, be it court or castle, can ever be approached directly but can only be neared through some slightly improper manner, some personal female intervention. Just as the body of a woman is approached through the deformity, as we shall see, so the law is approached through women. While the law and women may seem to be the central objects of the desire of the protagonist, they really exist only to allow the slight illegality or deformity. It would appear that women are a ruse to allow access to the law, just as deformity is a ruse to allow access to the woman, but the logic is reversed. The law is a ruse to allow women, and women are a ruse to allow the deformity. The fetish is paramount.

In one of Kafka's letters to Milena Jesenská, 9 August 1920, he writes that he is going to "try and answer the 'strach-touha' [fear-desire] question" and he says that "*In this case I have ONLY strach*" and it appears that he and

Milena are discussing sexual contact since he goes on to describe his first sexual experience. The 20 year old Kafka is "occupied with the nerve-racking cramming of, to me, senseless facts required for my first State examination" but notices a shop-girl from his window and "with the disgusting [*widerliche*] Roman Law between my teeth" (Kafka,1999c, p. 130), using sign language, he organises an 8 o'clock rendezvous. After some difficulty (the appearance of another man), Kafka and the girl go to a hotel ("Even before we got to the hotel all this was charming, exciting, horrible [*abscheulich*], in the hotel it wasn't different"). They repeat the experience, he says, two nights later. Already we see an implied relationship between the "disgusting" law and the "horrible", but exciting, sexual incident. Kafka then writes that he went away on holiday "where I played around a bit with another girl" and on his return "I could no longer look at the shop-girl in Prague, not another word did I exchange with her, she had become (from my point of view) my bitter enemy […]" (Kafka, 1999c, pp. 131-132). He explains why he could no longer stand this girl, even though she was a "good-natured, friendly girl", in a rather oddly negative manner:

> I won't say that the sole reason for my enmity was the fact (I'm sure it wasn't) that at the hotel the girl in all her innocence had made a tiny repulsive gesture [*eine winzige Abscheulichkeit*] (not worth while mentioning), had uttered a trifling obscenity [*eine kleine Schmutzigkeit*] (not worth while mentioning), but the memory remained […] (Kafka, 1999c, p. 132)

These unmentionable obscenities take on an importance far greater than their apparent and negatively valorised worthlessness. Kafka continues:

> I knew at that instant that I would never forget [the memory] and simultaneously I knew, or thought I knew, that this repulsiveness and smut [*Abscheuliche und Schmutzige*], though outwardly not necessary, was *inwardly however very necessarily connected with the whole thing* […] (p. 132: my emphasis)

It was "just this repulsiveness and obscenity [*Abscheuliche und Schmutzige*] (whose little symptom had only been her tiny gesture, her trifling word)" which had "drawn [him] with such terrible power into this hotel, which otherwise [he] would have avoided with all [his] remaining strength" (p. 132). Compare the inescapability of this attraction and desire to that of Josef K.'s eventual resignation to the reality of his case:

> But now his uncle had already taken him to the lawyer, and family considerations were involved; his job was no longer totally independent of the course of the trial, he himself had been incautious enough to mention the trial to a few acquaintances with a certain inexplicable feeling of self-satisfaction, others had heard about it in unknown ways, his relationship to Fräulein Bürstner seemed to fluctuate with the trial itself – in short, it was no longer a matter of accepting or rejecting the trial, he was in the midst of it and had to defend himself. (Kafka, 1998, p. 125)[46]

Since "the whole of one's life would have to be passed in review, down to the smallest actions and accidents, clearly formulated and examined from every angle" (Kafka, 1999b, p. 143), it behoves us to take seriously the broader conclusion that Kafka draws, in the letter of 1920, from his primary sexual encounter:

> And so it was then, so it has always remained. My body sometimes quiet for years, would then again be shaken to the point of not being able to bear it by this desire for a small, a very specific abomination, for something slightly disgusting, embarrassing, obscene [*Abscheulichkeit, nach etwas leicht Widerlichem, Peinlichem, Schmutzigen*],[47] even in the best that existed for me there was something of it, some sulphur, some hell. (p. 132)

So Kafka has sex for the first time, the girl is subsequently perceived with great hostility because of a

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[46] I use Mitchell's translation here as it reads more elegantly and clearly than the Muirs'.

[47] We see in the original German, that the words used to describe the obscene event are repeated over and over, while, of course, linking the sexual encounter with that of Kafka's study of the "widerliche" law.

minor and insignificant obscene act and it is this obscenity that becomes the most powerfully desired object in Kafka's later life. It will be useful here to repeat some of the observations I made earlier about Freud's 1927 article on "Fetishism" as Freud's analysis will resonate with Kafka's writing. I will also go on to provide a reading of "Fetishism" based on Julia Kristeva's essay on the "True-Real". It is through these textual considerations that we will be able to begin to discuss Kafka's attitude to *text* in the light of the letter to Milena.[48]

As we know, Freud bases his theory of the fetish on the fear felt by the boy-child on perceiving that his mother has no phallus; a fear based on the castration complex. The fetish substitutes for the missing penis and, through the process of disavowal, the child believes that the fetish both *is* and *is not* the female phallus (just as he now both believes and does not believe that women have penises): "a compromise has been reached, as is only possible under the dominance of the unconscious laws of thought" (Freud, 1991b, p. 353).[49] The fetish now attracts to itself the interest formerly given to the penis but, through the shock of imagining that the mother has been castrated and that the child is therefore also under a similar threat, and becomes a "permanent memorial" (p. 353) to this entire

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[48] Kafka's encounter with the shop-girl is described in some detail by Murray (2004, pp. 48-51), but apart from stating that the "sexual politics implicit in this narrative could be analysed at length" (p. 50), something that Murray does not do, this description is taken directly from Kafka's own writing and the biographer adds no new information or insight.

[49] I would also argue that the child (boy or girl) believes the same thing about men: men both do and do not have the phallus. This will accord with a certain Lacanian reading of the phallus as being inaccessible to both men and women: "Lacan thus differs from the overtly patriarchal Freud, for whom confrontation with the possibility of loss or absence of the penis functions as a key moment in the access to subjectivity. Lacan, by contrast, argues that the accession to subjectivity involves introducing the subject into an economy of lack defined in relation to the phallus. In patriarchal societies, such as our own, the penis happens to occupy the position of the phallus, but this coincidence should not blind us to the fact that in the final analysis the phallus is defined in terms of a psychic economy of lack rather than the topological accidents of the male anatomy" (Krips, 1999, pp. 8-9).

process. The fetish is now both a comforting replacement and, at the same time, a constant and consistent reminder of the lack of the "real" object. The fetish occupies a position of extreme instability and ambiguity, but also one of desire because it is, in fact, the logic of desire as such (the lack of lack).

In the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud writes of "other cases in which the sexual object is required to fulfil a fetishistic function – such as the possession of some particular hair-colouring or clothing, or even some bodily defect – if the sexual aim is to be attained" (1991b, p. 66). It would seem that Kafka's infatuation with the obscene act is very similar to Freud's formulation of fetishism: it is both repulsive and desired.

What, however, is the connection with "the whole thing"? In Julia Kristeva's seminar, "The True-Real" (*Le Vréel*), she argues that language occupies the exact position of the fetish – when the text is assigned meaning this is seen to be a fetishistic act – the text both has and has no meaning. Kristeva draws out this fetishistic contradiction:

> Isn't the enigmatic acquisition of language, which according to some fulfils an innate programme, achieved when the child is in fact capable of withdrawing cathexis from his imaginary representation of the maternal phallus, in order to cathect with at least the same degree of intensity that which represents it, and even better, *any* representative instance. (Kristeva, 1990, p. 225)

In other words, the process of fetish-formation is seen to be the condition of *representation*: the word becomes both a sign of an other and that other itself – "The area of disavowal ('I know very well but all the same'), the last-ditch hope and defence of the Ego, is introduced everywhere by the mechanism of language" (Kristeva, 1990, p. 225). Toril Moi glosses this argument in a way which makes clear that what she refers to as the "signified" (by which she means "referent", more properly), is a fiction created by

the fetish (however, since there is only the fetish, this fiction *is* the real: the "true-real"):

> The speaking subject in search of the "true-real" no longer distinguishes between the sign and its referent in the usual Saussurian way, but takes the signifier for the real (treats the signifier *as* the real) in a move which leaves no space for the signified. (Moi, 1990, p. 214)

Moi here seems to imagine that there might indeed be a "usual Saussurian way" for the sign to function, but Kristeva's analysis seems far more radical than this and insists that the subject always functions within the fetishistic mode (this being the mode of language and of meaning). In his book, *Fetishism and Imagination*, David Simpson also evinces a similar unease to Moi's in the face of the fetish: "What the name does […] is to disjoin image from identity, always with the threat that that image will subsume identity through the power of its social significations" (1982, p. 27). It is this "threat" of the engulfment of the real by the sign, an imaginary threat, to be sure, since the real is always already engulfed, which comes to constitute the status of the text for Kafka.

On the publication of his first volume of prose pieces, *Meditations,* Kafka writes to Felice Bauer:

> The novel is me, my stories are me. […] I would certainly not detach myself from my novel even in your presence; it wouldn't do me any good if I could, for it is through writing that I keep a hold on life […]. But bear in mind, dearest Felice, once I lose my writing, I am bound to lose you and everything else. (Kafka, 1978, pp. 252-253: 2/3 January 1913)

Identity is constituted through writing and is not separable from writing, but this identity is not particularly stable and is always threatened by that very writing itself:

> In fact, not to be really unhappy, not to be pierced by a fresh stab of unhappiness, but to see the pages

> being covered endlessly with things one hates, that fill one with loathing, or at any rate with dull indifference, that nevertheless have to be written down in order that one shall live. Disgusting! If only I could destroy the pages I have written in the last four days, as though they had never been. (Kafka, 1978, p. 185: 29/30 November 1912)

The text takes on a life of its own, and even more, provides life for the parasitic writer. At any rate, books, for Kafka, become tactile objects of desire and are in some way associated with women. He writes: "The greed for books is certain in me. Not really to own or read them, but rather to see them, to convince myself of their actuality in the stalls of a bookseller. […] Books that I own delight me less, but books belonging to my sisters do delight me" (Kafka, 1999, p. 114: 11 November 1911). The very act of writing becomes a sexually exciting task:

> Dearest, once again I put aside this exceptionally repulsive story [*The Metamorphosis*] in order to refresh myself by thinking of you. […] But don't be unhappy about it, for who knows, the more I write and the more I liberate myself, the cleaner and the worthier of you I may become, but no doubt there is a great deal more to be got rid of, and the nights can never be long enough for this business which, incidentally, is *highly voluptuous*. (Kafka, 1978, p. 165: 24 November 1912: my emphasis)

If we continue to insist that Kafka's writing and textuality is essentially fetishistic, we can understand the *Letter to His Father* as a mourning for the lost phallus (a meaning which is continually being lost through writing, just as that writing is the only means of gaining it).[50] Kafka's writing attempts to exorcise the figure of his father, but simultaneously places him at the very centre of that writing, which is Kafka's life. He writes in the *Letter*:

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[50] Bernheimer comments: "Writing sustains his life, but that life involves a cannibalistic depletion of his biological existence. […] To write is to enter the darkness of unknowing, where language becomes a buzz of words that expresses no self but rather perpetuates its erosion, its continual never-ending loss" (1987, p. 91).

> My writing was all about you; all I did there, after all, was to bemoan what I could not bemoan upon your breast. It was an intentionally long-drawn-out farewell from you, yet, although it was enforced by you, it did take its course in the direction determined by me. (in Glatzer, 1976, p. 179)

4.1 *The Trial* and Deformity

The Trial contains many enigmatic references to slight bodily deformities, but they all have the distinction of being perceived by Josef K. without further commentary. The first such example in the text, occurs after K.'s arrest when he leaves, with the three clerks, for his office.

> Then Frau Grubach, who did not appear to be conscious of any guilt, opened the front door to let the whole company out, and K. glanced down, as so often before, at her apron-string, which made such an unreasonably deep cut into her massive body. (Kafka, 1999b, p. 23)

The "unreasonableness" of this bodily incision increasingly becomes a mark of the law itself, since the law always seems to operate beyond the legal confines of rationality. As K. remarks to the arresting officers: "This is sheer nonsense!" (p. 19).

Just as K. is accused by the priest that he casts "about too much for outside help, […] especially from women" (p. 233), so this investigation may be similarly charged with being caught up in a minor detail of the text. It is, however, the minor detail, it should be remembered, that connects it all. Inexplicably, the strange Fräulein Montag moves in with Fräulein Bürstner sometime later after the arrest and Kafka describes her thus:

> A teacher of French, she was a German girl called Montag, a sickly, pale girl with a slight limp who till now had occupied a room of her own, was apparently moving into Fräulein Bürstner's room. (1999b, p. 86)

This limp is sometimes evident in those closely connected with the court itself; for instance, the student "was small, his legs were slightly bowed" (p. 65) and the verger in the cathedral who limps away with "something of the same gait, a quick limping motion, K. had often as a child imitated a man riding on horseback" (p. 227).[51] In *The Castle*, when K. speaks to someone from the Castle itself on the telephone, the voice he hears has "a small defect in its speech […] which its owner tried to cover by an exaggerated severity" (1975, 26). The deranged functioning of authority writes itself on the bodies of those closely connected with it (or, conversely, the limping of its subjects infects the smooth running of its machinery).

Perhaps the most memorable of the deformities that appear in *The Trial* is Leni's deformed hand:

> "Has she any physical defect?" "Any physical defect?" asked K. "Yes," said Leni. "For I have a slight one. Look." She held up her right hand and stretched out the two middle fingers, between which the connecting web of skin reached almost to the top joint, short as the fingers were. In the darkness K. could not make out at once what she wanted to show him, so she took his hand and made him feel it. "What a freak of nature!" said K. and he added, when he had examined the whole hand: "What a pretty little paw!" (1999b, p. 123)

K. then kisses her hand and they fall to the floor: "You belong to me now," Leni says. Henry Sussman provides an interpretation of this moment which is not developed in his article but the observation concerning "excess" and "connections" is important:

> The excess of the connective tissue between Leni's fingers is an outgrowth of the atmosphere in which Huld operates, an air heavy with connections, a crowd

[51] Not to mention Kafka himself: "[On a trip to Paris with Max and Otto Brod] Kafka took with him his usual consignment of ailments (and some new ones: a dislocated big toe and a painful leg), and, after a week, an outbreak of boils forced him back alone to Prague" (Murray, 2004, pp. 80-81)

> environment conducive, however, to the rise of mutations, a phenomenon also evidenced by the hunchbacked leader of the girls in Titorelli's house. (1977, p. 50)

We can understand the fetish is exceeded by its overdetermined meaning and non-meaning: the deformity is both excessive (in the sense of superfluous) but also excessive in the sense of being all-encompassing. The hunchback to whom Sussman refers is described here:

> The girl, who had a slight spinal deformity and seemed scarcely thirteen years old, nudged him with her elbow and peered up at him knowingly. Neither her youth nor her deformity had saved her from being prematurely debauched. (Kafka, 1999b, p. 157)

The girl's sexuality, represented by the metaphor of the deformity, exceeds the bounds of decency and order; it demands attention. The deformity, through its abnormality, always draws attention to itself but can never provide a full explanation of its meaning. It does, however, constantly demand the attribution of such meaning. The fetish occupies the place where meaning and non-meaning ceaselessly collide and produce each other in a series of infinite readings.

It is here that the reading of the fetish becomes involved with the process of the law since the reader of *The Trial*, as much as K. himself, is invariably trying to read the text of the law and to extrapolate a meaning and an order. However, we realise that the body is always already written by the law in a script that we cannot understand (much like the prisoners of "In the Penal Colony"). In *The Trial*, the law is written on one's lips.

The commercial traveller, Block, explains to K. that one of the superstitions surrounding the actions of the court is that "you're supposed to tell from a man's face, especially the line of his lips, how his case is going to turn out" (p. 193). The law is seen to have already deformed a person

through its prior inscription on the body. Earlier in the novel, the importance of lips is hinted at:

> "Well, what is there to say?" replied K., who was weary of seeing Fräulein Montag staring so fixedly at his lips. Her stare was already trying to dominate any words he might utter. (p. 90)

The attempt to read is seen as a repressive, violent act. In a similar way, lips themselves are capable of a violent repression of their own:

> [The student] kissed her loudly on the throat without at all interrupting his remarks. In this action K. saw confirmed the tyranny which the student exercised over the woman […]. (p. 66)

K.'s humanitarian concern is somewhat marred by an earlier attempt of his own lips to find a similar pleasure:

> "I'm just coming," K. said, rushed out, seized [Fräulein Bürstner], and kissed her first on the lips, then all over the face, like some thirsty animal lapping greedily at a spring of long-sought fresh water. Finally he kissed her on the neck, right on the throat, and kept his lips there a long time. (pp. 37-38)

Earlier we saw that Kafka parasitically draws life from his writing (just as that same writing threatens to destroy him) and here K. laps "greedily" from the neck of a woman. The lips, like writing, are already written upon (by the law) and at the same time continually try to write the law onto the other's body – the law of their own desire (which is, paradoxically, not their own but an other's desire, the law's desire for judgement). Lips seem to be filled with meaning but this meaning is obscure and impossible to divine. Just like the contradictory fetish object they both try to control the messy space of the body and the law, and at the same time are a reminder that such control is impossible.

We can also see the law as occupying the same position as deformity in *The Trial*. Simpson writes of the ornament as fetish: "insofar as the ornament comes to function as sign representing the thing to which it is habitually connected, any attention to that sign as a thing in itself partakes of fetishism" (Simpson, 1982, p. 20). Thus the lips of the accused man contain in their deformation the exact discourse of the law. It is to this discourse that all attention is directed and the distinction between lips and law, body and text, becomes unstable. The law and its reification into various obscure texts (bodily or otherwise – it is no coincidence that the court's law books contain only crude pornography) – is produced by the fear that the law is not, in fact, coherent and understandable and so stand as talismans against the possibility of such unintelligibility while simultaneously denying access to the law in any pure form. Representations of and to the law are both useless and essential (if only to ensure the existence of those seeking redress through the law). Thus all the members of the court are marked, not only by a bodily defect, but also by heterogeneous signs, which unite them in a conspiracy of very little meaning:

> But under their beards – and this was K.'s real discovery – badges of various sizes and colours gleamed on their coat-collars. They all wore these badges as far as he could see. (p. 56)[52]

Where the reading of a sign becomes indistinguishable from the non-reading of a sign, we must turn to one the Great Advocates for proof and evidence:

> Reading a text might indeed reveal that it is untouchable, literally intangible, *precisely because*

[52] "If everything, everyone, is part of justice, if everyone is an auxiliary of justice, from the priest to the little girls, this is not because of the transcendence of the law but because of the immanence of desire. […] While the Uncle pushes him to take his trial seriously, for example, to see a lawyer and pass through all the steps of transcendence, K. realizes that he should not let himself be represented, that he has no need to be a representative – that no one should come between him and his desire" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 50).

> *it is readable*, and for the same reason unreadable to the extent to which the presence within it of a clear and graspable sense remains as hidden as its origin. Unreadability thus no longer opposes itself to readability. (Derrida, 1992, p. 197).

Such twisted logic, as we have seen, is only available to us in the economy of the fetish ("I know very well but all the same").

Let us return to the *excess* of the fetish that always demands interpretation without ever allowing such interpretation to take place. If the sign no longer refers to anything but itself *but at the same time* does refer to a time when the sign-fetish was not itself, then the fetish will never be stable, but always *excessive*. It is in just this way that Michel Foucault describes the function of commentary as always trying to repudiate the excess of the sign, but always merely creating more such excessive signs. In *The Birth of the Clinic* he writes:

> The signified is revealed only in the visible world of the signifier itself that is itself burdened with a meaning that it cannot control. Commentary rests upon the postulate that speech (*parole*) is an act of "translation", that it has the dangerous privilege images have of showing while concealing, and that it can be substituted for itself indefinitely in the open series of discursive repetitions […] (Foucault, 1973, pp. xvi-xvii)

In other words: "You have not enough respect for the written word and you are altering the story" (Kafka, 1999b, p. 237) or "The scriptures are unalterable and the comments often enough merely express the commentator's bewilderment" (p. 240). The fetish-law-text-body becomes the judge of all other commentaries but is itself only ever such a commentary. Such judgement "may happen to any reader in the presence of the text, or critic, publisher, translator, heirs, or professors. All these are then at the same time doorkeepers and men from the country. On both sides of the frontier" (Derrida, 1992, p. 211).

For Kafka, the body and the text are indistinguishable and he functions, just as we all must do, in the space of the fetish where the difference between signifier and signified, sign and referent, is constantly collapsing and it is in this collapse of the fetish that what we call reality exists.

> Finally, the assemblage no longer works as a machine in the process of assembling itself, with a mysterious function, or as a fully assembled machine that doesn't function, or no longer functions. It works only through the dismantling (*démontage*) that it brings about on the machine and on representation. And, actually functioning, it functions only through and because of its own dismantling. It is born from this dismantling (it is never the assembling of the machine that interests Kafka). (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 48)

Chapter 5: Jan Švankmajer and the Object of Fetishism

Jan Švankmajer has produced a series of objects entitled "Fetishes". These consist of sculpted wooden heads with hundreds of nails knocked into them in a mimicry of wooden African fetish sculptures (similar nailed objects appear as far back as *Punch and Judy* (1966) and also in *Conspirators of Pleasure* (1996))[53]. In the commentary at the exhibition, Švankmajer writes:

> We are all convinced of the omnipotence of desire. We hail the imagination as some sort of "queen of human ability", we side with the "possible" against the "actual". And for this reason people have made fetishes. (Švankmajer, 2004: my translation)

In an echo of Hegel's description of the supposed African practice of trying to dominate nature through the subjugation and veneration of the fetish object (1975, p. 180), Švankmajer describes the fetish as "an autonomous subject" but that is also "expression of your Desire" and "a pure extract of the pleasure principle". Where Hegel writes that if "something unpleasant occurs that the fetish has failed to avert, the oracles which they have consulted are deemed to false and become discredited" (1975, p.181), Švankmajer says that if the fetish "does not fulfil our expectations or if it does not keep to the terms of our

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[53] Švankmajer seems acutely aware of the anthropological history of this objects, referred to as *nkisi*, "dynamic animated objects", in Central Africa: "*Minkondi [nkisi* dominated by nails] have a variety of functions; however, as early indications (mainly those resulting from the research of the Swedish missionary Karl Edward Laman) suggested, the principal approach to *minkondi* is to render oaths and undertakings authoritative and binding - hardly the conventional expectation of a 'fetish'. As such they are called upon to ratify treaties between opposed communities, to endorse attestations of innocence where someone asserts their wrongful accusation, to confirm initiation vows, and other such oath-taking. The method of binding or fixing an individual intention or affirming an undertaking is by the driving in of a blade or nail. To this is attached some identifying element - cloth, hair or perhaps saliva. This personalises the approach to the *nkondi* and, in the event that a vow is broken or a guilty supplicant wrongfully protests his or her innocence, unerringly identifies the impostor" (Mack, 1995, pp.59-60).

'agreement', we always have the power to punish it for this: chop it up, burn it, bury it" (2004). He also claims that "fetishes are not art".

The embedding of nails into the fetish object is a violent act designed to bridge the gap between the secular world and the world of the supernatural and not merely to threaten or cajole that object as Mack explains in this previously quoted passge:

> The driving in of the nails is not, then, a casual act of magical fantasy but a dramatic, presumptive and inherently dangerous act which pierces the surface that lies between the two domains. (Mack, 1995, p.62)

Švankmajer's films function in a similar way to these objects. They represent fetish objects, objects that are imbued with an obscure power, but are also themselves the objects which allow the viewer to access such power. The films are also radically self-reflexive and constantly highlight the fact that the magic they represent is an illusion, just as the movement of inanimate objects is a trick of the camera. It is the very crudeness of Švankmajer's stop-motion animation that never quite allows the viewer to lose him or herself in the comforting shallows of the cartoon.

In this chapter, I wish to begin by considering the way in which objects are represented in a number of Švankmajer's short films and argue that it is the self-reflexive nature of the narratives that force us to consider the films themselves as objects rather than as mere representations. The self-reflexivity is the nail that penetrates the "surface that lies" between spectator and the meaningful object of the film. I then go on to explore the way in which Marx's discussion of fetishism and the object relates to Švankmajer's films before discussing theories of value and meaning. I end by discussing in some detail the four feature length films that Švankmajer has made, pausing for

a detour through the history of surrealism and the short film, *Flora* (1989).

5.1 A Game with Film and Sound

Švankmajer's short films from *The Last Trick of Mr. Schwarzwald and Mr. Edgar* (1964) to *Food* (1992) have been exhaustively catalogued and discussed in Peter Hames' edited collection *Dark Alchemy* (1995) and online by Michael Brooke (http://www.illumin.co.uk/svank/). Brooke also provides insightful contemporary reviews of the films from *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, mainly by Michael O'Pray and Julian Petley. In the face of such overwhelming documentation it is difficult to find a space in which to say something about these films that has not already been said when it comes to the visual image. However, here I would like to discuss an element of the films that is not usually given much attention (although, of course, it is often mentioned) and that is their use of sound. I will argue that sound, and particularly the texture of the recording of that sound, is used to both highlight the reality of the situation depicted while at the same time undermining that reality by making its constructed nature palpable. We know simultaneously that the sound is real and unreal. Sound in Švankmajer's short films functions in the space of disavowal.

I will discuss three films that tend not to have the same amount of critical attention paid to them as many of the others. These are: *Spiel mit Steinen / Game with Stones* (1965), *Picknick mit Weissmann / Picnic with Weissmann* (1969) and *Tichý týden v domě / A Quiet Week in a House* (1969). In all three films the soundtrack draws attention to itself and I will set out how this will inform an understanding of these films as (disavowed) fetish objects.

Švankmajer's interest in sound is evident from his second film *J.S. Bach: Fantasy in G Minor* (1965), made in the same year as *Game with Stones*. O'Pray points out that *Bach* is in many ways a standard film that illustrates the "Baroque richness of Bach's music" and that there is a tension between the "tactility of images of subject matter" and the "higher moral concerns of the film, embedded in Bach's music" (1995, pp. 54 – 55). *Game with Stones* has a similar concern with the surface of stone as *Bach*, but, as Michael Brooke points out, the "majestic organ has been replaced by a tinkly music-box" (1998). The film depicts a ticking clock, the insides of the music-box and a tap which periodically drips stones into a bucket which then arrange themselves in variety of patterns which become more and more anthropomorphic as the film goes on. Roger Cardinal describes the film thus:

> The film […] enacts a crazy merging of stones with water, as black and white pebbles are shown swelling out of a faucet and plopping into a bucket. If we take these pebbles to originate in a stream, then they could be understood as signalling water by metonymic association. (1995, p. 84)

The stones crack and break into smaller pieces throughout the film and Cardinal sees this a "more 'natural' metamorphosis" and an indication of a "geological process" (p. 84). However, he does not seem particularly pleased with his analysis since he immediately goes on to say that:

> It would be an exaggeration to claim that deep intellectual propositions are being voiced at each and every stage of these tamperings with natural properties […]. (p. 84)

However, if we pay attention to the soundtrack of the film, a more satisfactory reading emerges. *Game with Stones* begins with a close up shot of the top of a wooden door on which is crudely written in white paint the name of the producing studio, Froschberg Zeigt Filmstudio (the film was shot in Austria). The camera tracks down the door and pauses at regular intervals at each line of credits. The

door is scarred with marks and appears to be fairly old. The soundtrack has two main components: the first is the regular ticking of a clock and the second is the loud hum of background noise. This would make it seem that the sound was recorded at the same time as the footage was shot (this may not, of course, necessarily be the case). We can also hear the crackle of the film soundstrip as it is reproduced by the projector. This unusual sound stresses the recorded nature of the soundtrack. This is particularly highlighted just before the camera moves down to Švankmajer's directing credit as a defect in the film strip itself affects the sound reproduction and a dull popping sound is heard (accompanied by a slight blemish on the image). The shot now rests on a rusty door handle which moves slightly and the door creaks loudly open.

There is a cut to a vertical tracking extreme close-up of a cracked white-washed wall, which is followed by a number of similarly timed horizontal and vertical shots of different parts of the wall. The soundtrack still buzzes loudly with atmosphere and the incessant ticking of the clock. It is possible to hear that the sound recording apparatus is struggling for some reason and a clear rhythm emerges from the background noise. The camera quickly pans left and reveals a tap affixed to the top of a clock beneath which hangs a swinging bucket. The camera zooms in. The atmosphere track is now distorting quite badly. There follows a montage of the clock, bucket and tap as well as the spiked metal drum of a music-box. The montage sequence continues, showing the moving mechanism of the clock as well as various cogs in the music-box. The clock strikes twelve and the tap turns itself on and begins to eject black and white stones into the back which is painted half black, half white.

As the clock strikes there is a loud chime, a very pronounced squeaking as the tap turns and a exaggerated and rather ridiculous popping sound as each stone drops out of

the tap. The final shot of this sequence shows the drum of the music-box as the cogs begin to turn. Just before we hear the first note of the simple tune, the atmospheric buzz of the soundtrack disappears (implying that the music-box has been recorded in a properly sound-proofed area) and the we cut to a black and white surface, clearly not that of the battered, old bucket, and the stones begin to move and arrange themselves in various patterns. Thus, not only has the image moved into a different space, but so has the soundtrack. Both of these spaces are pristine compared to the decrepit state of both before. This contrast between a "real" and an "imaginary" space serves to emphasize the artificial nature of the film as much as the hissing of the soundtrack did before. This disparity between clear recording (both visual and aural) during the stones' animation and the fuzzy reality of the tap/clock sequence is repeated four more times in the film.

The fifth time that the tap spills stones, the bucket has a hole torn in its bottom and the stones fall onto the ground with a loud clatter. The music-box then begins to play, the hiss of the background fades away, and there is a slow montage of the broken bucket, the pile of stones and the clock. There is a final medium shot of the clock during which the focus pulls back and the door slams shut with the word "Ende" painted on its etched surface. At this point, the soundtrack is silent except for the very noticeable recording hum and crackle.

The film creates two spaces: one which looks real but sounds recorded, and another which looks unreal (the animated field of stones) but sounds natural (the recording is unblemished by hiss). This simple strategy of contrasting sound with image creates an impossible space in which we cannot decide which might be "reality". Of course, both spaces are as unreal as each other while simultaneously being equally real. This is the space of disavowal.

Perhaps the most obscure of Švankmajer's films *Picnic with Weissman* was made at the same Austrian studio as *Game with Stones*, and Michael Brooke describes it as the "least significant" of four late 60s films including *The Garden* (1968) – a live action film in which a man visits an old friend only to find that his house is surrounded by a wall of living human beings, *The Flat* (1968) – which is discussed below – and *A Quiet Week in a House* (1969). *Weissman* presents a sunny afternoon in a pleasant garden where a wardrobe, some chairs and an empty suit while away the hours in happy relaxation while a shovel digs a hole in front of the wardrobe. The most significant structural part of the film is the old 78 gramophone player whose handle cranks in the first shot of the film.

The gramophone sets itself in motion and as the needle hits the record, we hear the distinctive crackle of the crude needle before the jaunty tune begins. The soundtrack recording emphasises this hiss and this adds to the strangely outmoded and old-fashioned atmosphere of the picnic. Cut between an overhead close-up of the spinning record on which the credits appear in an art-nouveau script, is a slow montage of garden vegetation. As a male voice begins to sing in German (the record is *"Ein Freund, Ein Guter Freund"*, A Friend, a Good Friend on His Master's Voice) the montage begins to encompass long shots of the garden showing the various pieces of furniture gathered on the lawn. This segues into a closer montage sequence concentrating on parts of the furniture as well as a laid out pack of facedown tarot cards that turn themselves over in various patterns.

We cut back to the gramophone player just as a scraping noise interrupts the song and we see that a snail (or at least its shell) is now sitting on the record and causing the interruption. The materiality of the sound is once again brought to our attention. An empty suit with a wooden hanger for a head lazes contentedly on a chaise-longe and

the eventually the snail leaves the record player in stop-motion. A chess set on the grass begins to play. There is a montage of close-ups of the wardrobe and the sepia photographs of various children and ladies, before a shovel lifts itself off the wardrobe's side and begins to mark out a hole in front of it. The record comes to an end and the gramophone clicks off. A rather false sounding chirping of birds plays on the soundtrack. The record heaves itself off the player and rolls back to its sleeve with exaggerated noises. Another record ("Oh, Doris! Where Do You Live" by The Collegians on the Odeon label) rolls over to the player, puts itself on and the process of cranking begins again, with bird noises continuing. The needle hits the record, the shot cuts to a close up of the spinning label, the birds disappear and the familiar hiss lays a background for the new track. This time there is a perceptible scratch on the record. The shovel continues digging – the implication being that activity stops while the record changes – and a German voice begins to sing (obviously the song is not the same as the one on the record label).

A rubber balloon emerges from a drawer in a desk, inserts its tube into the keyhole and the drawer pumps in and out to inflate it. The drawer is lined with a crumpled magazine photograph of a naked woman. Three chairs begin a kickabout with the ball. The record comes to an end and so does the other activity. The ball has fallen into the shovel's hole and it loudly scoops it out and it is punctured by the gramophone needle. Birds sing, records change (a tango, "Madonna Bruna" – although, again, this is not the record that plays). As the crackling tune begins, the chaise-longe hurriedly scuttles away, followed by the other furniture, as the sun begins to set. Only the shovel and wardrobe remain. Then a camera emerges from behind the wardrobe and assembles itself into position in a manner that recalls *Man With a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929). It takes a photograph of the suit holding a bunch of flowers and we see the sepia version of this. The camera takes a

photograph of the wardrobe and chaise-longe (which has suddenly reappeared). A series of photographs is taken of the various bits of furniture and these replace the human photographs, now lying ripped up on the ground, on the wardrobe. The record stops, birds sing and the player is covered with dry, autumn leaves, as is the remaining furniture.

The door of the wardrobe opens and a man, tied and gagged, only in his underwear, tumbles out into the hole. We hear the sound of gravel being scraped as shovelfuls of earth begin to fill in the hole. We do not see the shovel; we only hear the sound of it.

While *Picnic with Weissman* is clearly concerned with the threat of the animated inanimate, it is also a form of *memento mori*. The old records and battered furniture, the hiss of the recording and the arrival of Autumn leaves, evoke the sense of an inescapable movement into death. Thus it is not so much the objects that are the harbingers of doom, but rather it is time itself which threatens the human as well as the object.

A Quiet Week in a House shows a man, who appears to be some kind of secret agent, outside a house which he seems to have been watching for some time. He makes his way into the entrance hall, puts up a calendar and for the next seven days he drills holes into doors and peers through these to see animated visions. On the seventh day he fills the keyholes with dynamites and runs off across the fields. Simon Field sees this film as a political allegory:

> The film was completed in the year following the Prague Spring of 1968. In this context, it can be seen as the paranoid vision of a fugitive only able to contemplate his dreams furtively, through tiny holes in closed doors, the visionary force of what he sees confirming the revolutionary power of the imagination opposed to everyday repression. These dreams are riddled with images of destruction and crushed aspirations - the ruined chair that cannot

> fly, the cockerel broken beneath mounds of clay, the pigs' trotters bound by wire, the tongue minced, the sweets revealed as rusty screws. (1988, p. 38)

The title of the film would seem to be a nod to Jan Neruda's composite tale, "A Week in a Quiet House" (*Týden v tichém domě*) which forms part of his *Prague Tales* (1877). The structure of various odd vignettes being seen through keyholes seems to be taken from Jean Cocteau's *The Blood of a Poet / Le Sang d'un poète* (1930) in which the poet (played by Cocteau) drops himself into a mirror and finds that he is now in a hotel corridor and is able to craw along and see visions, ranging from opium smoking to an execution, through the keyholes of the room doors.

A Quiet Week's title sequence consists of the credits on a rough, dark wall. As soon as the film starts we hear the loud sound of a film projector implying that the film is being displayed specifically for us at this particular moment. Thus from the very outset we are in a double place: the fictional space of projection posited by the film (where are we?) and the real place of our viewing. The film image itself also jumps and stutter as if it were being displayed in some sort of clandestine and unsatisfactory venue. The whining of the projector is a constant throughout the film whenever we see the sepia tinted narrative of the man.

As he runs to reach the house, there is a sound reminiscent of a bombing raid which quickly dies away as the man desperately approaches the house with an uncharacteristic handheld camera following him. This *cinema verite* styling adds to the impression that we are watching some sort of revolutionary or dissident film record. However, whenever the man sees a vision through a doorhole, the soundtrack falls eerily silent for the duration of that sequence and this contrasts greatly with the clattering sounds we hear whenever we are with the man himself. At the end of the film, we never hear the sound of the supposed explosion

although the clattering projection continues till the last second.

This contrast between the sepia, *verite* sound world and the silent animated world puts into doubt which one is more real than the other. Of course, it is impossible for us to decide this, even though the soundtrack suggests that the sepia events are "real". Precisely because those events are so clearly, sonically marked as a film projection we can never forget that we are watching a representation of events and never those events themselves. In contrast, to this, during the silent animated sequences, which are obviousky impossible, the very still camera and the silence itself allow us to imagine that these impossibilities are taking place (and, in a sense, they really are because their reality is only that of film). The film demands to be both believed and disbelieved simultaneously. Fellow member of the Czech Surrealist Group, František Drye observes of the animated objects in the film: "They both are and are not real: an animated tongue consumes left-over food; chairs sprout wings and fly off; flowers whither and then burst into flame" (1995, p. 145). As I have been arguing throughout this section, this is the logic of disavowal that is central to Jan Švankmajer.

5.2 Marx and Fetishism

> It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous [*sinnliches*] thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (Marx, 2000 (1867): p. 47)

In his description of commodity fetishism (section 4 of chapter 1, volume 1 of *Capital*), Karl Marx outlines the way in which an object moves from being something which is of quotidian usefulness to an element within a system of exchange. It is in this procedure that the object acquires what he calls "exchange value". Before this rather mysterious process, the object has only "use-value" which, in an imagined ideal world, is unambiguous and singular. An object in this pre-lapsarian world is "sensuous" (the German *sinnliches* has similar overtones of carnality and eroticism) and "ordinary" – it is only itself. It is, however, unclear how the usefulness of this object relates to the amount of labour needed in order to manufacture it. Marx goes on to write that "with regard to the foundation of the quantitative determination of value, namely the duration of that expenditure or the quantity of labour, this is quite palpably different from its quality" (Marx, 2000, p. 48). Thus quality (use-value) is not related to quantity (labour-value) in any clear or obvious way. A very useful object might only require a minimum of skill or other expenditure to produce, while something palpably useless might demand vast resources. The problem here is how to measure the usefulness of any object.

This question is one of meaning. When we ask the question, "What is the value of this table?", we are asking, in some sense, "What does this table mean?" There are, of course, a number of ways of answering this new formulation of the query: "What does this table mean *to you*?" (I have had it for a long time; it is a gift; it is a family heirloom; it is part of the inventory of a furnished but rented flat; it is a method of making eating more comfortable; it is a part of a process of manufacturing other objects; I made this table myself; I assembled this table from a flat-pack). Only some of these answers relate directly to what may be termed a use-value understood as the value of the object's *function* (from the Latin *fungere*, to perform). In order, then, to fully understand what the function of an object

might be, it should, ideally, have a limited number of such functions, preferably only one. The table, thus, should (ideally – and perhaps this expression should disclose its Platonic overtones more overtly) have an easily discernible function from which its use-value could easily be extrapolated.

It is, however, not very easy, if not impossible, to delineate exactly what the function of a table is. The table's function is *not* immanent. At times it may support food; at others it will provide the surface for writing; at still others, it will be knocked on its side and used as an improbable shield against gunfire. Sometimes the table will be used to hide under or as the screen for amorous foreplay (as, for instance, in *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999) or, in a slightly more ambiguous way, in *When Harry Met Sally* (Rob Reiner, 1989) – however, even these "examples" are less than exemplary and would each require a more detailed, (con)textual reading to fully explore their possible meanings)[54]. It would appear that a table could have an infinite number of uses since each time it is used, even for the same function, its use will imply something slightly different from the time it was used for this function before [cf. Derrida – "Signature, Event, Context"]. However, this is not the problem that Marx is worried about. Marx assumes that function is obvious and limitable (readable, meaningful) and that it is when we do something with an object that is beyond/beside/irrelevant to its true function (assuming that we know what that is) that something strange happens.

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[54] In his essay on the uncanny, Freud writes: "[In *Strand Magazine*] I read a story about a young married couple who moved into a furnished house in which there is a curiously shaped table with carvings of crocodiles on it. […] We are given to understand that the presence of the table causes ghostly crocodiles to haunt the place, or that the wooden monsters come to life in the dark, or something of that sort. It was a naïve enough story, but the uncanny feeling it produced was quite remarkable" (Freud, 1990, p. 367). Nicholas Royle discusses the original story, "The Inexplicable" and this "key passage" in Chapter 9, "Inexplicable", of his *The Uncanny* (2003, pp. 133-141).

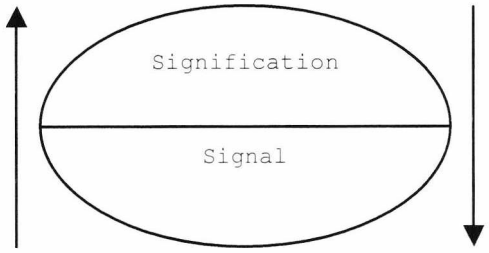
What is this strangeness of the table that is now more than a table (and less than a table)? Once the table becomes an element within a system of exchange, the value of that table is abstracted. In effect, within an exchange system there is an assumption of absolute equivalence. It would seem possible to define the real value of an object and then compare it to (and possibly exchange it with) the real value of any other object. The thing used to measure this real, abstracted value is, of course, money. Money, as such, is not an object, but rather a signifier of value. Marx argues that it is this structure of possible equivalence that animates our table, allowing it to think "grotesque ideas". There is thus a beyond-the-table that Marx facetiously compares to the spiritualist table that becomes possessed to move seemingly of its own accord. The table is however not moving of its own volition but is rather being manipulated much like a puppet on a string.

The difficulty is that without this system or structure that animates the table, the table does not, practically, exist. While Marx assumes that the commodification of the table, or rather, the fetishisation of it, comes *after* the table's existence *qua* table, and is therefore an unwelcome intruder into the house, as our prior discussion has shown, the table's existence (meaning, value) cannot precede its entry into some sort of structure. As Ferdinand de Saussure points out with reference to language, value does not derive from any interiority but rather from exteriority as a system of differences.

> Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's social product as is their language. (Marx, 2000, pp. 49-50)

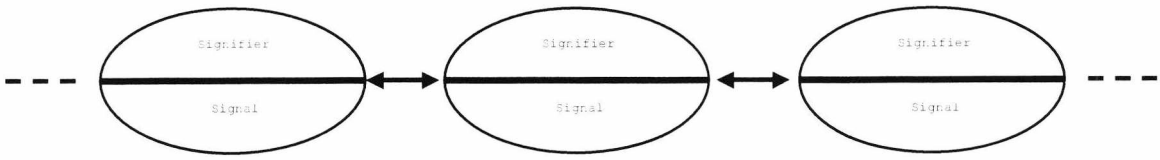
5.3 Saussure and the System of Difference: Value and Meaning

In his discussion of synchronic linguistics, Saussure discusses the concept of linguistic value and asks rhetorically: "Are *value* and *meaning* synonymous terms?" (Saussure, 1990 [1915], p. 112 [158]), to which he replies that they are not, but that they are easily confused especially since value, "in its conceptual aspect, is doubtless part of meaning" (p. 112 [158]). Thus value, according to Saussure, is a subset of meaning (whether value has another non-conceptual aspect is not an issue that Saussure discusses). He first discusses meaning and provides the following diagram (Saussure, 1990, p. 113 [159]):



He explains that "meaning is simply the counterpart of a sound pattern" (p. 112 [158]) and that this can be seen from the arrows in the diagram. However there is a second counterpart: the "linguistic sign itself, as the link uniting the two constituent elements, likewise has counterparts. These are the other signs in the language" (p. 113 [159]). We must here understand that the signifier (signal, word) and signified (signification, concept) are not to be confused with the sign itself (the diagram or, rather, the connection between signal and signification).

This element of connectivity is what determines the system of language as a structure (p. 113 [159]):



Saussure poses the problem that it would appear to be impossible to reconcile the vertical arrows in diagram 1 (meaning) with the horizontal arrows in diagram 2 (value). In this sense, we may make the claim that diagram 1 illustrates Marx's concept of use-value, while diagram 2 is a representation of exchange-value.

He says that it must be remembered that "values of any kind seem to be governed by a paradoxical principle" and that values "always involve":

> (1) something *dissimilar* which can be exchanged for the item whose value is under consideration, and
> (2) *similar* things which can be *compared* with the item whose value is under consideration. (p. 113 [159])

It will be worth considering Saussure's next explanatory paragraph in some detail as he neatly equates the process of economic exchange with the functioning of linguistics:

> These two features are necessary for the existence of any value. To determine the value of a five-franc coin, for instance, what must be known is: (1) that the coin can be exchanged for a certain quantity of something different, e.g. bread, and (2) that its value can be compared with another value in the same system, e.g. that of a one-franc coin, or of a coin belonging to another system (e.g. a dollar). Similarly, a word can be substituted for something dissimilar: an idea. At the same time, it can be compared to something of a like nature: another word. Its value is therefore not determined merely by that concept or meaning for which it is a token. It must also be assessed against comparable values, by

> contrast with other words. The content of a word is determined in the final analysis not by what it contains but by what exists outside it. As an element in a system, the word has not only a meaning but also — above all — value. And that is something quite different. (pp. 113-114 [160])

It is perhaps disingenuous of Saussure to use as his first example a coin. If, for instance, he had decided to use as his example a table, then it would be more difficult to easily see how many loaves of bread could be exchanged for it. The coin already represents a system of exchange in which it is merely a cipher of value. The coin itself, as an object, has no value. It must then be concluded that (2) precedes (1): it is only because the coin is part of a system of exchange that it can be exchanged for something other than itself. Thus Saussure's argument here seems to be a ruse, because his final conclusion is that the "content of a word is determined in the final analysis not by what it contains but by what exists outside it" which would imply that his first model of meaning (Diagram 1) is produced by the system of Diagram 2 and that the vertical arrows between signification and signal do not, in fact, exist. This then allows Saussure to postulate his most well-know claim: "*In the language itself, there are only differences*" (p. 118 [166]: emphasis in original). However, he still insists that there is a difference between value and meaning as "the value of a sign may change without affecting either meaning or sound, simply because some neighbouring sign has undergone a change" (p. 118 [166]). However, this insistence cannot be sustained within the terms of his analysis since Saussure, perhaps in a similar manner to Marx, appears to want to keep the integrity of meaning separate from the relativism of value while never adequately explaining how these two systems might interact. Saussure is not unaware of this problem as he explicitly begins his discussion at this point: "it looks impossible to assimilate the relations represented here by horizontal arrows to those other relations represented in the previous

diagram by vertical arrows" (p. 113 [159]). Saussure is unable to explain adequately the relationship between the signification and signal link and the connections between signs in a system.

One of the examples that Saussure uses to demonstrate the difference between meaning and value begins: "The French word *mouton* may have the same meaning as the English word *sheep*; but it does not have the same value" (p. 114 [160]). He concludes that the "difference in value between *sheep* and *mouton* hinges on the fact that in English there is also another word *mutton* for the meat, whereas *mouton* in French covers both" (p. 114 [160]). The status of what "meaning" might be as it is used in the first sentence seems unclear and this anxiety is perhaps expressed by the use of the word "may". In what way do *mouton* and *sheep* have the same meaning? While *sheep* refers to the animal itself, the word *mouton* can refer both to the animal and to its meat. It is clear that the French word can be used in a way that the English one cannot, but this is as much a description of the words' meaning as their value. Saussure's distinction between these two terms seems tendentious since he appears to want to step back from the radical relativism of his formulation of value.

Slavoj Žižek calls this the "*retroactive effect of naming itself*" (1989, p. 95). Ernesto Laclau glosses Žižek in the following way:

> For if the unity of the object is the retroactive effect of naming itself, then naming is not just the pure nominalistic game of attributing an empty name to a preconstituted subject. It is the discursive construction of the object itself. (1989, p. xiv)

The object does not preexist language in some way and similarly neither meaning nor value can preexist the system of their articulation, although both Marx and Saussure hope to keep hold of something ("meaning" in Saussure, "use-value" in Marx) that might be thought to come before that

structure. Laclau reads from this a basic instability since "if the process of naming objects amounts to the very act of their constitution, then their descriptive features will be fundamentally unstable and open to all kinds of hegemonic rearticulations" (p. xiv). This should not be understood to mean that every object can be made to mean or be anything one might desire (although this implication does hover at the edges of the argument), but rather that there is no *fundamental* stability on which the system rests, only a *conditional* one. Thus we can understand Laclau's formulation of "rearticulation" as being similar to Derrida's notion that the centre (which is *not* the centre) "permits the play of its elements inside the total form" (1990, p. 279). It is not that the structure is "open to all kinds of hegemonic rearticulations" but rather that it is open in *some*, quite restricted, ways which cannot really be envisaged from within that system itself.

Of course, the problem that Saussure is trying to solve is that of structure itself. How can a structure come into existence if the elements within it are a product of that very structure? This is the issue that Derrida addresses in his "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" where he identifies "center" or "fixed origin" as the premise of the structuralist project (Derrida, 1990, p. 278). He writes that the idea of a structure with no centre "represents the unthinkable itself" (p. 279) because thinking, as such, is predicated on a structure (of thought). The centre, as defined by Derrida, cannot be represented: "it is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible" (p. 279), and so has neither value nor meaning but is rather that which makes value and meaning (if there is a difference between these two terms) possible. Derrida goes on:

> Thus it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very

> thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality. (p. 279)

It is here that he identifies the aporia of structuralism:

> The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center. (p. 279)

Derrida's definition of structure is understood as a system within which one element can be substituted for another except that element which allows the system to come into existence, its centre. Thus the element that allows substitution is not itself substitutable and is therefore not itself part of that structure (of substitutability). The claim is that any structure must *imagine*, incorrectly, that its centre *is* the centre in order to be coherent. While there can be "play" (pp. 278-279) within the structure, in the sense of a certain looseness, the structure itself cannot be thought to be on unsound ground (what Martin McQuillan quoting Derrida quoting Paul de Man calls the "defective cornerstone" of structure (McQuillan, 2000, p. 29)) if that system is to carry on functioning. Nevertheless, this necessary blindness to the instability of the structure does not imply that the structure is, in fact, stable but rather that it merely imagines itself to be so.

It is clear that the centre of Saussure's linguistic model is substitutability itself. Roman Jakobson (1999) refers to this as substitutability on either the syntagmatic or paradigmatic axes (he also calls these the metonymic and the metaphoric poles), which can be seen as analogous to Saussure's posited distinction between meaning and value. It is the fact that any element in the system is in some way interchangeable with any other that underpins language as such. Substitutability is also the cornerstone of Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism as it is in Freud's

analysis of fetishism per se. It is this central component, which is "neither a word nor a concept" (Derrida, 1986, p. 3), both the centre and not the centre, that allows the system to function, or, rather, to play. The name of substitutability that Derrida uses is, of course, *différance*: a description of the movement of difference and deferral on which Saussure depends.

5.4 Derrida, Saussure and *Différance*

In "Différance" (1986) Derrida discusses the ramifications of this term for semiology as outlined by Saussure and does so in a manner that will allow us to put more clearly into focus the preceding observations on Marx and Saussure and their understanding of value and meaning. Derrida writes:

> The sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, "thing" here standing equally for meaning or referent. The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present. [...] The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence. (Derrida, 1986, p. 9)

The sign is that which both allows communication and at the same time does not allow direct access to that which it is communicating:

> Whether we are concerned with the verbal or the written sign, with the monetary sign, or with electoral delegation and political representation, the circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself, make it ours, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, intuit its presence. (p. 9)

Nevertheless, there is an intimation of presence in the sign. The sign promises the possibility of presence and seems to be full of presence even though it is constituted only by absence. Although the moment of contact with the thing is constantly deferred it is in that deferral that the possibility of that presence is made manifest. Derrida continues:

> [T]he substitution of the sign for the thing itself is both *secondary* and *provisional*: secondary due to an original and lost presence from which the sign thus derives; provisional as concerns this final and missing presence toward which the sign in this sense is a movement and mediation. (p. 9: emphasis in original)

This "lost presence" is the ghost of meaning in the sign and it is unclear exactly what it is towards which the sign is pointing. There is no *primary* or *final* presence in which the sign is grounded, and it is only in its secondary and provisional nature that it has an essence (although that essence is, by definition, deferred and different). Derrida draws two conclusions from his discussion. The first is that *différance* is not a sign since it is not a representation of presence and is not "governed by and moving toward presence" (Derrida, 1986, p. 10). It is, as discussed before, the possibility of the sign or "the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general" (Derrida, 1986, p. 11), which I have also called "substitutability". Secondly, "one puts into question the authority of presence, or of its simple symmetrical opposite, absence or lack" (p. 10) and in so doing undermines any absolute certainty in the possibility of communication. Derrida here, and elsewhere, fundamentally complicates the phenomenological model of the perception of presence. In the discussion following the presentation of "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" at Johns Hopkins University in 1966, he says:

> Now I don't know what perception is and I don't believe that anything like perception exists. Perception is precisely a concept, a concept of an intuition or a given originating from the thing itself, present itself in its meaning, independently from language, from the system of reference. And I believe that perception is interdependent with the concept of origin and of center and consequently whatever strikes at the metaphysics of which I have spoken strikes also at the very conception of

> perception. I don't believe that there is any perception (Derrida, 1982, p. 272)

The problem here is that *différance* is "the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. Thus, the name 'origin' no longer suits it" (Derrida, 1986, p. 11) and so if perception is "interdependent with the concept of origin and of center", which are both not what they seem, then perception, in the sense of "capturing through" an element which is merely a screen between sign and thing, cannot but be imbricated in the impossibility of its own project.

> Not only is there no kingdom of *différance*, but *différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening and infallibly dreaded by everything within us that desires a kingdom, the past or future presence of a kingdom. (Derrida, 1986, p. 22)

The idea of a threatened kingdom is one to which I will refer in reading Freud's formulation of the fetish, but if we understand "kingdom", with its implications of centrality and order, to stand in for the idea of system, then, paradoxically, that which constitutes that kingdom, its cornerstone, is also that which is absolutely subversive of it: the cornerstone is fundamentally flawed and the system exists only as a delusion. A delusion that is, of course, called reality.

It is this delusion that Žižek urgently argues should not be forgotten lest in that slip of memory we move once again into totalitarianism. Building on Freud and Hegel, he avers that the human is "an animal extorted by an insatiable parasite (reason, *logos*, language)", the human is defined and destroyed by this parasite and:

> there is no solution, no escape from it; the thing to do is not to "overcome", to "abolish" it, but to come to terms with it, to learn to recognize it in its terrifying dimension and then, on the basis of the

> fundamental recognition, to try to articulate a *modus vivendi* with it (Žižek, 1989, p. 5)

This can also be read as a manifesto of interpretation itself. It should be accepted that every reading is merely that, a reading, and not the procurement of some undoubted truth. This, in Žižek's terms, would be a "direct path to totalitarianism" (p. 5) and that, both politically and philosophically, "we must live in an interspace and in borrowed time; every solution is provisional and temporary, a kind of postponing of a fundamental impossibility" (p. 6). This "fundamental antagonism" (p. 6) is another way of explaining what Derrida means when he writes that the "center is not the center" (1990, p. 279) and that there are "two interpretations of interpretation" (1990, p. 292). One of these "dreams of deciphering a truth" while the other seeks to "pass beyond man and humanism" into the "affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation" (p. 292). While this second mode of interpretation may echo Laclau's romantic notion of freedom, Derrida continues that there is no choice between these two interpretations: "we live them simultaneously and reconcile them in an obscure economy". (p. 293). This "obscure economy" is the economy of the fetish and of disavowal itself.

5.5 Žižek, Ideology and Fetishism

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek explores the way in which it is possible to understand the functioning of ideology within the processes of this obscure economy. It is, of course, in the very word "obscure" that a certain misunderstanding already arises. With its overtones of concealment, obscurity implies the existence of something that is obscured and this is often the way in which ideology is understood to function: it is "an illusory representation of reality" (Žižek, 1989, p. 21). However,

as Žižek argues, "it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived of as 'ideological'":

> *"ideological" is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence* – that is, the social effectivity, the very reproduction of which implies that the individuals "do not know what they are doing". *"Ideological" is not the "false consciousness" of a social (being) but this being itself in so far as it is supported by "false consciousness"*. (Žižek, 1989, p. 21: emphases in original)

In other words, it is not that consciousness is "obscured" by ideology, but rather that consciousness is a *function* of ideology itself: there is no consciousness without ideology. Thus to presume to move beyond ideology or to see the truth behind ideology is to fundamentally destroy the subject that presumes it exists outside of that ideology since "to exist" is an ideological premise. Another way of describing this would be to say that ideology is "true consciousness" for without it there would be no consciousness, at least not as it is understood within the ideological terms of understanding itself.

It is in the discussion leading up to this conclusion that Žižek introduces Octave Mannoni's formulation of fetishistic disavowal: "I know very well, but still…" (1989, p. 18). In this possibility of thinking two contradictory things at the same time, we find the rule for the possibility of thinking itself which knows that it is impossible but all the same…we will continue *as if* it is possible. This double-think is a necessary condition of thinking if we accept that content is illusory, that:

> the "secret" to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form (the form of commodities, the form of dreams) but, on the contrary, *the "secret" of this form itself*. (Žižek, 1989, p. 11)

While it is possible to understand this non-secret of the secret (and I discuss this in more detail with reference to the uncanny), it is impossible to take it seriously since that would annihilate the possibility of that which we choose to call "thinking", which is predicated on the understanding that there *is* a secret content to the world. It may be useful to consider this in terms of Edgar Allan Poe's story, "The Purloined Letter", in which an important document is hidden by being put in clear sight of those searching for it. Dupin explains the logic of this using the following analogy:

> "There is a game of puzzles," he resumed, "which is played upon a map. One party playing requires another to find a given word --the name of town, river, state or empire --any word, in short, upon the motley and perplexed surface of the chart. A novice in the game generally seeks to embarrass his opponents by giving them the most minutely lettered names; but the adept selects such words as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the chart to the other. These, like the over-largely lettered signs and placards of the street, escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious; and here the physical oversight is precisely analogous with the moral inapprehension by which the intellect suffers to pass unnoticed those considerations which are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident." (Poe, 1845, internet)

Of course, in Žižek's view of this problematic, it is not so much that the player chooses to hide his or her word within the map, but rather that the map is itself the thing which one is searching for but cannot find since one searches *within* the map without ever stepping back to see that the map is the thing sought. In this sense, Žižek moves beyond Poe towards Jorge Luis Borges in "On Exactitude in Science" where Borges imagines a map which corresponds exactly to the territory it seeks to describe:

> In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. (Borges, 1998, p. 325)

This map is seen by later generations to be completely useless and is abandoned and only "Tattered Ruins" remain in the "Deserts of the West": "in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography" (p. 325). If, however, the map were truly accurate there would be no way in judging which is reality: the map or the real. In fact, it would be impossible to have a completely accurate map which was *not* reality itself. The real is always already a representation of itself and this leads us to Jean Baudrillard's definition of the simulacrum in his gloss on Borges:

> Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra* – it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. *The desert of the real itself.* (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 166)

Baudrillard, however, is himself imagining a prior nostalgic reality that somehow preexisted the precession of simulacra and which allows him to hang on to the possible vestiges of a real which may still exist elsewhere. Žižek, incidentally, would appear to agree with Baudrillard on this point since he finds in Lacan's later work "a possibility for the subject to obtain some contents, some kind of positive consistency, also outside the big Other, the alienating symbolic network" (Žižek, 1989, p. 46). He explains this possibility as one "offered by fantasy: equating the subject to an object of fantasy" (p. 46). The argument goes that a fantasy cannot be wholly symmetrical in that the fantasised cannot fantasise the fantasiser in an infinite loop, since this would imply a certain mysticism as to the origin of the loop itself (the loop necessarily must have, as we have seen, a centre that is

not its centre; a centre that is outside (and inside) that loop). Therefore the necessary escape from the banality of the symmetrical fantasy lies in the fact that the fantasised is, in fact, fantasised *by* something, but that that fantasiser is wholly inaccessible to being thought of within the world of the fantasy since it is the *form* of the fantasy which is the fantasiser, the vestige of the real, and therefore the real itself.

Thus, while Baudrillard expresses his distaste for the state of simulation in the rhetoric of nostalgia, Žižek, via Lacan, seems to obviate the necessity for a simple longing for a pre-lapsarian reality by re-introducing the positive as *différance*: the positive as that which is neither a word nor a concept. In this way, the real is another word for *différance* in that it is the possibility on which the "real" "itself" depends but which is impossible to comprehend within the realm of the "real". This is also the logic of "I know very well, but still…" which Lacan expresses in his seminar on Poe's "The Purloined Letter":

> For the signifier is a unit in its very uniqueness, being by nature symbol only of an absence. Which is why we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be *or* not be in a particular place but that unlike them it will be *and* not be where it is, wherever it goes. (Lacan, 1956, internet)

For Lacan, the letter as symbol is both full and empty at the same time and is what, crucially, allows the story to come into existence but which is itself "nothing at all". Here, of course, I refer to Žižek's use of the "Hitchcockian object" (Žižek, 1989, p. 163), the McGuffin, as an example of Lacan's *objet petit a*, "a pure void which functions as the object-cause of desire" (Žižek, 1989, p. 163). In "The Purloined Letter" the contents of the letter itself are completely irrelevant to the story itself but are at the same time indispensable to that story: without

the letter there is no story to be told. The irony of this is that centre of the story, the letter (the object), whose contents are banality itself, is not at all its centre, but is rather the excuse for the story as it exists. There are numerous examples of such centred non-centres in fiction, for instance, the object in the suitcase in Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), which becomes the joking impetus for Alex Cox's *Repo Man* (1984) and achieves its apotheosis of banality in *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994). Žižek explains of this (these) object(s):

> That would be, then, the precise definition of the real object: a cause which in itself does not exist — which is present only in a series of effects, but always in a distorted, displaced way. (p. 163)

It also clear that Žižek is referring to this object as a way of understanding the unconscious. In this sense, all the terms we have been looking at as the absent cause of the real, are given to us as ghosts. The real is permeated with the ghost of its own possibility. The ghost is that which is impossible within the rational world, but which, paradoxically, allows the space of fantasy in which that world can come into existence. It is this ghost of meaning that is embodied in the disavowal of the fetishist and it is the same ghost that appears in Saussure (meaning, value) and in Marx (use-value, exchange-value). It becomes clear that the logic of meaning is a ghostly one, for, as Lacan says, the signifier is "by nature symbol only of absence" but is at the same time that which allows us to understand the concept of presence.

In commenting on the difference between a Marxian understanding of fetishism and a Freudian one, Žižek argues that:

> in Marxism a fetish conceals the positive network of social relations, whereas in Freud a fetish conceals the lack ("castration") around which the symbolic network is articulated. (Žižek, 1989, p. 49)

In this definition, one form of fetishism conceals a positive value (Marx writes that commodity fetishism is "nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (2000, p. 48)), which in this case is the "definite social relation", while, for Freud, the fetish conceals a lack. However, this is a disingenuous way of reading both Freud and Marx. For Freud's "lack" (which is, of course, not a lack in the first place – the woman is *not* castrated) is rather the positive fear of the possibility of such a lack (translated from a fear of powerlessness in the face of the castrating father), while Marx's "positive network" cannot preexist the "fantastic form of a relation between things" since there could not be a relation *at all* without the possibility of exchange. Thus for both Marx and Freud that which the fetish conceals, the real for both of them, is brought into existence by and simultaneously provides the possibility of existence for the system of the "obscure economy". The object that the system conceals is merely the possibility of its own existence. There is, fundamentally, no difference between the Marxian or Freudian position since both the "process of disavowal (Freud) and estrangement (Marx) produces an over-valuation of things, and the over-valuation flows onto and affects an aesthetic and semiotic of things" (Mulvey, 1996, p. 3). Although it is not, as Mulvey states, an "over-valuation", but rather "valuation", as such, that is the result of disavowal or what she calls estrangement.

The paradox of all of this is the status of the object itself. While the object's meaning (value, essence) is evidently determined by the system within which it exists, it is the system that is brought into existence by the object. Does the system fantasise the object, or the object the system? Following Žižek it is possible to argue against a symmetry here and claim that only one of these scenarios is true but that, from our position as objects within the system, it is impossible for us to judge which it might be.

It may even be possible to argue that the system is an object that operates in a similarly obscure way in far larger economies that we are unable to imagine (rather like the science fiction cliché of the universe as a subatomic particle within an almost infinitely larger existence. In *Men In Black* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997) the McGuffin of the plot is a universe contained within a pendant, but, at the end of the film, it becomes clear that the current "real" universe is similarly a tiny object within another universe). Additionally, the structure of every discrete object within a system is also a reflection of the logic of the structure of the system itself (hence the Renaissance insistence on the complementarity of social and natural systems – natural systems, however, understood through the focus of sociality) but the problem arises of how to deduce what this logic is from within the system of logic itself. Here it may be useful to consider in a little more detail the work on logic by Charles S. Peirce since it clarifies the guesswork that must inevitably be involved in a system whose rules do not precede it.

Apart from his more famous semiological model of icon, index and symbol, Peirce provides a useful set of distinctions between induction, deduction and what he terms "abduction". He writes that: "Deduction proves that something *must* be; Induction shows that something *actually is* operative; Abduction merely suggests that something *may be*" (quoted in Harrowitz, 1988, p.171). Deduction is the process whereby, a rule and a case being known, a result is inevitable: "something *must* be". Thus:

Rule: A → B
Case: A
⇩ process of deduction
Result: B

If we are presented with a case and result, we are then allowed to induce a rule: "something *actually is*". Thus:

Case: A

Result: B

↘ process of induction

Rule: A → B

On the other hand, if we already have the result (the clue or signifier) we must then abduct a rule (which means, in effect, guessing the cause of the result): "something *may be*". Thus:

Result: B

↙ process of abduction

Rule : A → B

Case : A

In the terms that we have been discussing the problem of the system and its relation to the object, it seems clear that we are in the position of having only the result (B) and that it is only through abduction that we can guess the rule that provides the bedrock for both deduction and induction (Sorfa, 1994, pp. 22-25). It is only through abduction that it is possible to move away from the double-bind of the self-reflecting system, but it must be understood that the rule abducted is merely a guess and that there is no guarantee that it will be true for all results. Abduction can also be thought of as the opposite process of fetishisation since that embodies the opposite logic of the mystificatory production of the result.

Case: A

↘ process of fetishisation

Result: B

Rule: A → B

It is a particular fascination with the status of the object that is characteristic of surrealism in general and

of Jan Švankmajer in particular. We will see that his films explore the ways in which objects retain a certain ghostly presence which is also the illusion of presence. While Švankmajer is often discussed as an animator, it will be argued here that his use of animation is primarily to confuse the distinction between so-called live-action film and its supposedly inferior copy, the animated film. It will become clear that animation (the illusion of life, to use one of the most popular clichés in the discourses surrounding animation) is really the logic of live-action, that it is life that is the illusion, rather than animation. Although, of course, this deconstructive move (cf. McQuillan) of reversing the power dynamic of the binary system, is also disingenuous since, of course, it is not that animation is the "truth" of life but rather that in upsetting the rational relationship of priority between the two, we are able to glimpse the movement into another economy of thought.

> [W]e always live in an interspace and in borrowed time; every solution is provisional and temporary, a kind of postponing of a fundamental impossibility. (Žižek, 1989, p. 6)

The line of thinking that I have been following here is quite clearly what many call "deconstructive" and Henry Staten usefully sums up what this might be: "Deconstruction could be seen as founded in a skeptical questioning of the power of philosophical language to give us a reality that is more than reality-as-presented-by-philosophical-language" (Staten, 1986, p. 20). Here Staten points out that deconstruction is not merely the banality that all reality is language, but rather that it is a "*denial that there is language*" (p. 20: emphasis in original) in the exact sense that Derrida means when he writes that "*There is nothing outside of the text*" [*il n'y pas de hors-texte*] (Derrida, 1976, p. 158: emphasis in original). Both of these aphorisms point not towards total chaos but towards a denial that truth or reality exists in an ideal space

outside of the systems that generate that very truth or reality (thus, of course, disallowing the definition of "truth" or "reality" as that which is external to "language", but not denying that "truth" and "reality" have a force). Staten puts it in this way:

> As soon as this strict integrity [of the present] is violated by *différance* [and we can, I think, read "constituted" for "violated" here], by the essential constitution of the present by the reference inscribed within it to what is nonpresent, the door is open to nonessence and thus to what would classically be conceived as formlessness or the flux […] (Staten, 1986, p. 20)

However, this flux is avoided since it "is not a question of giving up idealization, but of modulating it, of allowing it to open out onto some possibilities that have not been conceivable under the old formulas" (p. 24). Staten's hope is that the understanding of reality as "reality-as-presented-by-philosophical-language" will lead to the possibility of other ways of thinking, which are also "at the same time a kind of postponing of a fundamental impossibility" (Žižek). Derrida neatly encapsulates all of this in his epitaph to "Structure, Sign and Play", taken from Montaigne:

> We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things. (Derrida, 1990, p. 278)

It is as interpretations, rather than as primary, original texts (as if such a thing could exist), that I will consider the films of Jan Švankmajer.

5.6 Turning Tables with Marx

At the beginning of his discussion of commodity fetishism[55],

[55] More correctly this should be the fetish-like character of the commodity, since Marx's title is "*Der Fetischcharakter der Ware und sein Geheimnis*". This is discussed in some detail by Ehrbar (2004, p. 358). All references to the German version of *Capital*

Marx claims that the commodity, while seemingly simple and easy to understand (*"selbstverständliches"* and *"triviales"*), is, in fact, somewhat mysterious (*"daß sie ein sehr vertracktes Ding ist"*). In a very useful commentary on *Capital*, Hans Ehrbar explains that the oddness of the commodity "lies […] in the fact that the social forces buried in the commodity are not under the control of those handling the commodity" (2004, p. 362). Marx writes that "as soon as [the object] emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness" (Marx, 2000, p. 46). The object is no longer merely itself, but is seemingly invested with a life of its own which, for Marx, is really only a screen for the system of commodity exchange and its occlusion of the social relations (and exploitations) on which capitalism bases itself. Marx then makes reference to contemporary interest in spiritualism when he describes the table as "dancing of its own free will."[56] Ehrbar comments that "the commodities seem to be *animated beings* with their own intentions and social relations" (Ehrbar, 2004, p.369: my emphasis).

Surrealism in the 1920s was also particularly interested in the thought that the real world might contain messages from somewhere else and became youthfully excited by the idea of automatic writing and "psychic automatism".[57] It is, of course, central to the concept of surrealism that there exists another, "super", reality somewhere else. Very quickly the topographical literalness of such a formulation was replaced by rather more nuanced understandings of the

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rely on Ehrbar's annotated version.

[56] "Spiritistic table-shifting had become fashionable during the reactionary aftermath of the1848 revolution in Germany. Marx saw the irony: while social progress was frozen, tables began to move" (Ehrbar, 2004, p. 370).

[57] This interest is mapped out in some detail by Rachel Leah Thompson in "The Automatic Hand: Spiritualism/Psychoanalysis/Surrealism" (*Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*). She argues that the surrealists were embarrassed by this early enthusiasm for the occult and that "Breton would later claim vociferously and repeatedly that he believed no contact was possible between the living and the dead, and that mysticism was simply a flight of fancy." (2004, online)

existence of other possibilities. Hal Foster refers to "the surrealist experience of a reality pregnant with uncanny meaning, of a reality that awaits revelations as representation by the inspired detective-lover-reader" (Foster, 2001, p. 222), although the taint of mysticism is one that is often hard to dispel. For instance, the many references to "magic" by Švankmajer and other Czech surrealists seem simultaneously ironic and hopeful: wouldn't it be wonderful if magic, alchemy, the other world, really existed?

In the preface to the published script of his *Faust*, Švankmajer warns the cast and crew that they are dabbling in the mysterious world of magic and that anything might therefore happen:

> On the first day of shooting the film, I warned everybody involved that we were making a film which concerned magic, and that we therefore had to expect that, during shooting, things would happen which defied "healthy reason". I said that once the imagination was aroused it was capable of opening the abyss of our unconscious, which is then capable of everything – of both protective and aggressive reactions. I have my experience. (Švankmajer, 1996, p. vi)

Švankmajer is being deliberately provocative here, although he does make the connection between "magic" and the "abyss of our unconscious", which would imply that those things that may appear to be magical are in fact indications of the work of the unconscious (understood, I think, as repressed material). It is this psychoanalytic reading of magic as the eruption of the repressed that is also central to an understanding of the uncanny. Nevertheless, the shooting of *Faust* is beset by moments of misfortune. The cameraman, Svatopluk Malý, trips during a scene and destroys five of his teeth. In the shooting diary for the film Švankmajer continues to revel in moments of bad luck. In the entry for the 27th of August (1993), he rather melodramatically explains that:

> During shooting, our best technician, the carpenter, went mad (having done everything necessary for the film). He left the stove (the athanor) half-built in the alchemist's kitchen and told us his doctor had said he was mentally ill. The second day he was found hanging in a barn. Everything is going to blamed on *Faust*! (Švankmajer, 1996, p. ix)

It is as if Švankmajer wishes that the film will be seen to be the mystical cause of unrelated events and is gleefully attracted to the possibility that the film is cursed by its own subject matter. Later in the shoot, "someone stole [the producer, Jaromir] Kallista's car from outside his house in broad daylight. And ran over his dog. Let's be reasonable. We can't blame it all on *Faust*" (Švankmajer, 1996, p. xi). Most spectacularly, Petr Čepek, who plays the main role of Faust in the film, develops pancreatic cancer and dies soon after the film is completed. Švankmajer's final entry into his diary is for January, 1994:

> Kallista and I visited Petr Čepek. He's lost 20kg. I still have a guilty conscience, which I can't get rid of, for having cast him as Faust. But the film is ready. Everything's falling into place. It's the end. After all we're reasonable people. I repeat it to myself three times daily. (1996, p. xiv)

It cannot be denied that Švankmajer has a nostalgic idea of what magic might be, often couching it in terms of the "primitive" (which, of course, links him again to a certain anthropological discourse surrounding the fetish). In addition, we can make a direct link between Švankmajer's atavistic ruminations about the possible deleterious effects of dabbling in fictions of the supernatural and Freud's discussion of the uncanny. Freud writes:

> Let us take the uncanny associated with the omnipotence of thoughts, with the prompt fulfilment of wishes, with secret injurious powers and with the return of the dead. [...] We – or our primitive forefathers – one believed that these possibilities were realities, and were convinced that they actually happened. Nowadays we no longer believe in them, we have *surmounted* these modes of thought; but we do not

> feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation. As soon as something *actually happens* in our lives which seems to confirm the old, discarded beliefs we get a feeling of the uncanny; it is as though we were making a judgement something like this: "So, after all, it is *true* that one can kill a person by the mere wish!" or, "So the dead *do* live on and appear on the scene of their former activities!" and so on. (Freud, 1990, pp. 370-371)

It is precisely this frisson of insecurity that appeals to Švankmajer since it posits the possibility of another form of reality beyond the immediately apparent. Freud sees the attraction to this way of thinking as analogous to an anthropological phylogenetic residue,[58] where early childhood beliefs in magic are compared to the thinking of "primitive men" which continues to hold a certain force in our modern, adult lives. Freud at first appears to claim that the thinking of the "forefathers" does in some, perhaps physical, manner survive into contemporary beliefs.[59] He sums up:

> an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed. (Freud, 1990, p. 372)

However, Freud does go on to argue that these "primitive beliefs" would have themselves been the result of "infantile complexes":

> When we consider that primitive beliefs are most intimately connected with infantile complexes, and are, in fact, based on them, we shall not be greatly astonished to find that the distinction is often a hazy one. (Freud, 1990, p. 372)

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[58] "It seems as if each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to the animistic stage in primitive men, that none of us has passed through it without preserving certain residues and traces of it which are still capable of manifesting themselves, and that everything which now strikes us as 'uncanny' fulfils the condition of touching those residues of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression." (Freud, 1990, p. 363)

[59] For a critique of phylogeny, see Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man* (1984).

Certainly, Švankmajer sees his work as an interrogation of childhood desires and beliefs and is polemically interested in excavating the uncanny of the past, both individual and social. In her discussion of surrealism and the uncanny, Elizabeth Wright argues that more recent readings of the uncanny stress the subversive nature of this category: "for Surrealism reveals a strongly subversive element: the disturbance of the structure of our old desires can also be a sign that it is time to think about changing self and world" and that the "emergence of the uncanny may be the moment which disturbs our voyeuristic gaze, the moment which allows us to see that repression is futile, a waste of energy […], and that a redirection of desire is called for" (Wright, 1990, p. 275). The uncanny as the marker of repression is used to destabilise the comfortable verities of what Wright terms the "cunning of the normal" (p. 277). Since the normal "conceals its own construction" it is only through the uncanny that this construction is made apparent and which, perhaps optimistically, "removes itself from the category of the return of the repressed" (Wright, 1990, p. 277). Wright's argument, however, does not explain how the uncanny is to be transcended, since the normal is necessarily constructed through the double movement of the uncanny (the *Heimlich* depends on the *Unheimlich*, and vice versa). Thus it is not in the recognition of the uncanny that any revolutionary "new meanings" (Wright, 1990, p. 281) might emerge, but rather that the uncanny reminds the subject of the precarious nature of his or her understanding of the normal. Whether this makes subjects cling more fiercely to the idea of the homely or whether it encourages them to release both the homely and the unhomely in the hope that something else might be there, somewhere, to catch them, is a question that cannot be answered here. Still, it is clear that following either path leads one back to the other term and it is here, perhaps, that the strength of the desire or, rather, unavoidable necessity, to repeat is seen to be a logical imperative. It is this

doubling structure of the uncanny/canny that appears again and again in Švankmajer's films.

It should be remembered that Freud makes a distinction between the experience of the uncanny in everyday life and that encountered in literature (or fiction). He writes that if a fictional world establishes the possibility of things that would appear impossible and uncanny in the real world ("Wish fulfillments, secret powers, omnipotence of thoughts, animation of inanimate objects" (Freud, 1990, p. 373)) then those things will create no uncanny effect whatsoever in their reader. The uncanny can only emerge when there is a "conflict of judgement" (p. 373) as to whether something may or may not happen within the rules of a system. In this way of formulating the uncanny, we can see that Freud's understanding is very similar to that of Todorov's explanation of the fantastic as that which does not allow us to make a firm judgement as to whether an event is "uncanny" (apparently impossible but actually the result of a trick which utilises the normal rules of the world) or "marvelous" (impossible according to the rules of the world and therefore an indication of another world) (Todorov, 1975). While Švankmajer may wish to believe in the world of the marvellous, he understands that this is merely a facile desire and that it is in the fantastic, as understood by Todorov, and in Freud's uncanny, that the vacillation between real and unreal indicates, if not the existence of another world, then certainly the possibility that the real is in some small way unstable.

In an interview discussing *Conspirators of Pleasure* with Jonathan Romney, Švankmajer makes an oddly tautological argument about the nature of art when he claims that "art is on one side magic, because when it first started, many many thousands of years before, it was part of magic ritual, it didn't stand apart from magic ritual" and that "when it's thrown off the parts that it formed in magic it began to lose its magic, aesthetics entered into it, it

took on different meanings for society and it began to become more and more distant from reality" (Romney, 1997, p. 59).

Throughout his writing, Švankmajer tends to play a gently ironic game with the possibility of the existence of the mystical but in his films he is far more clear in his constant debunking of the illusion of magic and of animation. This play between illusion and reality is a major theme in his work and will be explored in more detail below. It is in Švankmajer's insistence on the materiality of the world and on the very illusion of animation (if not life itself) that there is a movement beyond the banality of the supernatural and into a more fundamental discussion of the possibility of making meaning.

5.7 Marx, Švankmajer and the Object

Marx says that the commodified table "evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas" (*"entwickelt aus seinem Holzkopf Grillen"*) and while it appears that these ideas come in some mysterious way from the object itself, its animation is in fact understandable only through the social relations that both produce and exchange that object. It is the process of fetishisation, which may be equated to commodification, that gives the object its "fetish-like" character (*Fetischcharakter*). This process is essential to an understanding of Švankmajer's work and forms both the subject (or theme) and the method of his films and other artefacts.

The image of the table is one that recurs throughout Švankmajer's oeuvre. While it often appears as the arena on which certain actions take place, as a setting for animated action,[60] it is also important as an object with drawers in

[60] See *Historia Naturae (Suita)*, the dance of the pen-knife in *Jabberwocky*, *Dimensions of Dialogue*, *Punch and Judy* and *Meat in*

which other objects may be stored or through which other realities may be accessed. Wells, commenting on *Virile Games*, writes that "the drawer [is] Švankmajer's most consistent symbol for the unconscious" (Wells, 1997, pp. 190-191). While this is clearly *one* of the meanings associated with the table drawer in his films, it is enough to note that the interior space of the table, signified by the drawer, is of importance and is a recurring motif within *Alice* and the other films.

5.8 *Alice* and the Animating Object

Animated film is generally discussed in terms of the ways in which the object appears to be alive. There is a fascination with the illusion of life that stop-motion film-making can give to almost any object, with at least two books on the subject entitled *The Illusion of Life* (Johnston and Thomas, 1995; Cholodenko, 1991). Charting the first emergence of animated film, Paul Wells argues:

> The illusion of life in animation was profoundly more challenging than the seemingly unmediated and recognisable representation of reality in live-action films, despite their novelty as an emergent popular art. As such, the animated film was soon perceived as something intrinsically different from the kind of films that began to constitute popular cinema. (Wells, 1998, p. 15)

While it seems that live-action film is perceived as being a presentation of life, it is as much an *illusion* as the animated film and it will be argued here that the animated film does not present so much an "illusion of life" (since live-action film does this as well) but rather that it foregrounds its very status *as* illusion and, in so doing, may be argued to highlight the illusory nature of live-

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Love. In all of these the table acts as a stage for various animated sequences and is important in that it provides a limitation for the action in the same way that a frame limits the boundaries of a painting. The importance of framing as a narrative device in Švankmajer's films will be explored in more detail in our discussion of *Faust*, although it is important to all of his work.

action film, and perhaps even the similar status of life as such.[61] It is this strategy of what we might call distanciation or *ostranenie*, following Shklovsky, that is central to an understanding of Švankmajer's films. František Drye explores this analysis in the first part of his introduction to a collection of texts by Švankmajer, called "Illusion and Anti-Illusion" (Drye, 2001, pp. 9-20). Here, Drye argues that Švankmajer is uninterested in replicating real life in his animation, but rather in bringing about a clash between the real and the fictional. With reference to his early films, *The Last Trick of Mr. Schwarzwald and Mr. Edgar* (*Poslední trik pana Schwazwaldea a pana Edgara*,1964) and *Punch and Judy* (*Rakvičkárna*, 1966), Drye writes:

> It is perhaps worth pointing out, that even in these first films Švankmajer breaks with the traditionally expressive forms of animated film, which are founded on pure illusion, on the discontinuity of creation and reality: in his use of theatrical masks, i.e. in the combination of a live actor with a puppet's head, in the shots of the puppeteer's hands, in the interaction between a live guinea-pig and a puppet, in the shots of the reverse side of the theatrical stage etc., all these things are the first steps in an *apparent confrontation* between two worlds: the world of reality and the world of filmic fiction. (Drye, 2001, p. 13; see Hames, 1995, p. 121 for a less literal translation)

He goes on to explain that this confrontation between these two worlds is only apparent or illusory (*zdánlivá*) because Švankmajer is not interested in the "annexation" (*anexe*) of one sphere by the other, there is no argument for the "dominance of chaos" (*dominace řádu*) - but rather that these encounters should be seen as the recognition of the continuity of both spaces (*continuity obou sfér*) which do

[61] The argument here may be developed by considering the status of "invisible" special effects, i.e. animated, either traditionally or with CGI, effects that are indistinguishable from live-action film but this is a discussion that is largely irrelevant to Švankmajer since his films are themselves investigations of this problem of distinguishing between the real and the unreal (or, rather, a revelation that this is a false problem) (see Cubitt, 1999; Buckland, 1999).

not jostle against one another - but each *should* saturate (*prostupovat*) the other. Drye concludes: "The analogical confusion of the border between perception [*vjmem*: reality in the phenomenological sense] and fantasy is already present in Švankmajer's films from the beginning" (2001, p. 13). Thus there is no simple opposition between reality and fiction but rather an understanding that each informs, and is the precondition of, the other. In this sense, the real illusion is that there are two different worlds, whereas, *in reality*, there is only one space, which some call the surreal (this echoes to some extent the statement that "Deconstruction is what happens" (McQuillan, 2000, p. 42)). Commenting on this slippage, Roger Cardinal links Švankmajer's strategy with Todorov's formulation of the fantastic:

> Švankmajer may be said to thrive on these circumstances [of the fantastic]: either his films are so brief and baffling that the viewer has no time to focus on the points of rupture where things slide from the real into the marvellous, or else – as in the case of *Alice* – they simply blur the boundary-line between the two contrasting domains (Cardinal, 1995, p. 87).

In his first feature length film, *Alice* (*Něco z Alenky*, 1987)[62], Švankmajer structures the film explicitly around

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[62] In the first issue of the Czech Surrealist journal, Analogon, Stanislav Dvorsky writes a eulogy to the Czech translation of *Alice*: "Alice...yes, irresistible Alice, always again new and wonderful, filled with a sort of secret sarcasm, so that, from that moment when she first caught our attention, we must be forced to return to her every now and then. 1931 was the year in which Carroll's *Alice* (she appeared then in Jaroslav Cisar's Czech translation) became once and for all, Alenka: 'she made her home in Czech cultural consciousness'. [...] Jaroslav Cisar was exceptionally suited to the role of her translator. Not only had he enough sensitivity for Carroll's 'paralogical' humour, but he also knew where the concerns of the interwar Czech avant-garde lay, the signature of his new resonance: 'The translator...hopes that he will find careful and grateful readers in a generation marked by the liberated humour of Voskovec and Werich', he notes in his postscript, as he invites us 1to take a step further on the road to Nonsense [...]'" (Dvorsky, 1969, p. 88: my translation). The film was funded internationally: "Jeremy Isaacs (Chief Executive of Channel 4) was primarily responsible for making it possible for Svankmajer to make his first feature film 'Alice', produced by Keith Griffiths and Michael Havas through

this play between the real and the fictional. Here we will examine closely the way in which the film begins and ends in order to understand the way in which Švankmajer radically undermines the distinction between story and plot.[63]

Švankmajer himself discusses the film in a rather less complex manner, at least in his interviews. He claims to be mainly interested in re-introducing the realm of the marvellous (again, in Todorov's terms) into the everyday. However, it may be important to note the conditional nature of the following statement ("would appear"):

> The purpose of my film would appear to be a modest one: to draw attention once again to *dream*, no longer valued in contemporary civilization, it has been cast aside onto the rubbish dump of our psyches. [...] Unless we begin to tell fairy tales and ghost stories at night before going to sleep and recounting our dreams upon waking, nothing more is to be expected of our Western civilization. (p. 53)

Švankmajer may here be accused of romanticising both childhood and so-called primitive society as the repositories of some sort of atavistic truth or reality. However, I feel that the film itself mitigates against such an accusation since its structure problematises the location, if not the very existence, of such a space of freedom.

The play between reality and illusion begins even before the film itself begins. As the title of the film's production company appears on screen, we hear the hiss and

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Condor Film in Switzerland. This complicated international co-production had to be hidden in its home country under a code name" (Anon., 1994, p. 17).

[63] "Story" here is understood as the chronological, cause-effect driven events of a narrative, while "plot" designates the way in which those events are presented in the actual film or novel (Bordwell *et al*, 1997, pp. 89-127). This distinction is also sometimes described as being that between narrative and narration, although narration in this sense is particularly concerned with what Branigan calls the "flow of knowledge" and the way in which story information is shared between spectator and character (Branigan, 1992, pp. 63-83).

bump of a vinyl record beginning to play. The first shot of the film shows a forest stream and the crackle of the record merges with the sound of running water as birds begin to sing loudly. The sound of the record is an example of what Michael Chion, following Jérôme Peignot, calls "acousmatic sound". Chion quotes Peignot's definition of this as "sounds one hears without seeing their originating cause" (Chion, 1994, p. 71). Chion opposes this to "visualized sound" which is "accompanied by the sight of its source or cause" (1994, p. 72). In the cinema, Chion argues, acousmatic sound occurs in two possible ways:

> In a film an acousmatic situation can develop along two different scenarios: either a sound is visualized first, and subsequently acousmatized, or it is acousmatic to start with, and is visualized only afterwards. (Chion, 1994, p. 72)

Chion assumes that the spectator will always be made aware, one way or another, as to what object is supposed to be making the sounds we hear. There is, of course, a third possibility: that we hear a sound that cannot possibly have its origin in the world of the fiction but that is neither extra-diegetic, in the manner of music, but rather points, as at the beginning of *Alice*, towards the immateriality of the entire story and also towards the materiality of the representing object: the film.[64] This third possibility can be seen to point towards an imaginary or impossible-to-imagine object, which is the source of the sound. We may term this impossible thing the acousmatic object (Sorfa, 2004).

Michael O'Pray writes that, in *Alice*, Švankmajer "uses sound (a ticking, water dripping, spoons clattering and drawers opening) to underline the materiality of the world he creates" (p. 16) but we can hear that this invocation of

[64] The sound of the playback device has become the basis for some contemporary music. See particularly the three seminal albums by Stephan Betke, released under the name Pole on the label Kiff SM: *1* (1999), *2* (1999) and *3* (2000). Also see Rob Young (2002) who explores the perception of this sound as a "mistake".

the material world is used, in the first instance, not to convince the viewer of the reality of the fictional space, but rather to foreground the recorded nature of the object that we are about to see. The record's hiss becomes the trickle of the stream and the distinction between recording and recorded is soon lost (at least as far as the sound design is concerned). This difference is enacted in the confusion that follows between the status of the narrated and the narrating.

The camera's stream reverie is broken by a sudden splash and it pans up to frame Alice (Kristyna Kohoutová) sitting on the bank next to her governess (whose head is out of frame and which we never see) . Alice is throwing pebbles into the water. The loaded sexual imagery of the film begins with the next shot of Alice's lap which has a diamond-shaped pile of stones arranged over her crotch.[65] Alice reaches over and leafs through the book on the governess' lap, as if to see how much further there is to go in this story, until she is slapped away. The book appears to be some sort of taxonomic guide to ornithology. After her hand is slapped, the camera pans right to a close up of Alice's face as she stares resentfully and on the edge of tears directly into the lens. At this point in the prologue, the film cuts to an extreme close up of Alice's mouth and she says: "Alice thought to herself:…". This close up shot appears whenever any character speaks in the film and their voices are always those of Alice, as if she

[65] The commentaries on Švankmajer's films often point towards this sexualisation of children. For instance: "*The Flat* is anarchic and melancholic, whilst *Down to the Cellar* is tense and menacing, and has a disturbing sexual undercurrent, due partially to the association made in our culture with any young girl under threat. Švankmajer has made the nature of the threat more explicit, however, in the character of the old man with the sweets who returns to haunt her in the cellar – bribing her, it seems, for sexual ends. It is as if Švankmajer has rooted out the sexual subtexts of stories such as Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, with their barely veiled eroticism" (O'Pray, 1995, p. 73).

were reading the story out aloud from a book.[66] Maureen Furniss comments:

> When each of these characters speaks, we are reminded of the "teller's" presence by a cut to a close shot of Alice's lips, voicing "said the White Rabbit", or whatever phrase is appropriate for the character. This motif is so well established that it is difficult for the viewer to forget that this story is being told by the central character, Alice; by the end of the film, the viewer anticipates the close shots of her lips to the point that they can even become irritating. (Furniss, 1997, pp. 12-13)

The repetition of this stylistic motif constantly forces the viewer to consider the question: "Who is telling the story?" and, as Furniss indicates, this incessant distanciation is an effect that results in a disruption of expected entertainment and this displeasure might be seen as a sign of success in overturning the demands of commercial cinema.[67]

In the prologue we thus see three Alices: the one in the story, the one telling the story and the one reporting the speech of the narrating Alice: the narrated, the narrated narrator and the narrator (there is also a fourth Alice, the one who places the needle on the record). As the titles appear, they are interrupted by Alice, the narrator, and she says, reporting the speech of the narrated narrator,

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[66] Peter Greenaway uses a similar effect in *Propero's Books* (1991) where every character's voice is echoed in the sonic background by Prospero (John Gielgud). The implication is that Prospero is the author of all the words spoken in the film, just as Shakespeare is the author of the entire play. The analogy between the magician and the playwright could also be of relevance here.

[67] Laura Mulvey writes: "It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article. The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked. Not in favour of a reconstructed new pleasure, which cannot exist in the abstract, nor of intellectualised unpleasure, but to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film. The alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn of oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire" (1975, p. 8). Švankmajer films may also be seen as trying to formulate a similar "language of desire" beyond the banalities of entertainment cinema.

with pauses between each phrase: "Now you will see a film…made for children…perhaps…But, I nearly forgot…You must…close your eyes…otherwise…you won't see anything". The placement of the "perhaps" confuses whether we are about to see a film made for children, or whether we are about to see a film at all. The exhortation to close our eyes is, on the one hand, a call to open the "eyes" of our imagination, but is also a demand that we leave the fictional world of film, of which *Alice* is an example, and leave for somewhere else.

After the title sequence we move into the nursery, which is filled with objects that will reappear in the film and that have also appeared previously in Švankmajer's other films, particularly and not surprisingly *Jabberwocky* (1971). Accompanied by the sound of water splashes, we first see a jar full of buttons, then two apple cores and then a basket filled with darning materials. This is followed by a montage of static shots of insect cabinets, small animal skulls, a decaying painting, some pickling jars filled with vaguely definable objects, perhaps pebbles, perhaps fruits, and finally a straw hat. In the next few shots we are presented with poppyseed tarts, ink, an etching of a fox and a hare, a door handle, a mousetrap, two puppets: one a Punch, the other Death, a light switch and finally an origami ship. Apart from references to objects in past films (*Punch and Judy* (1965), *Historia Naturae* (1967), *The Flat* (1968), *Picknick mit Weissman* (1969), and *Jabberwocky*), this collection of objects is a virtually summary of the action to follow. The composite animals in Wonderland are made of animal skulls and various bones. Jars of food contain either keys or dangerous sharp objects. The mousetrap prefigures the appearance of the water rat that tries to establish camp on Alice's head. The door handle predicts the numerous locked doors that Alice will encounter, while the etching foreshadows the imminent appearance of the White Rabbit. The ink and tarts reappear as the magical objects that allow Alice to change her size,

a function also offered by the wooden darning mushroom, which acts as the seat of the Caterpillar, itself a sock with prosthetic eyes and teeth. Roger Cardinal connects this section with the raw material that reappears in dreams:

> One thing seems clear: the treatment of objects within Wonderland corresponds to the fantastical procedures of dream-work, codified by Freud in terms of condensation, contamination, symbolization, and so on. We might concede that a Victorian child's nursery could plausibly contain a magic lantern or a bottle of ink – but a mouse-trap and a shelf of rodent skulls? Evidently, Švankmajer – who is on record as saying that he remembers childhood not as a time of tenderness but as one of cruelty – intends us to catch the corrosive hint within his otherwise over-sweet preamble. (Cardinal, 1995, p. 86)

The presentation of dream fodder ends with a full teacup into which Alice is throwing pebbles. It is possible that the Alice on the bank of the river in the prologue, is merely a fantasy of the Alice stuck in her room and that this action of throwing stones into a teacup is an echo of the imagined stream. This is reinforced when the camera cuts back from the teacup as if to show us who the thrower of stones is, but only shows us a doll which has a pile of stones in its lap. Alice's hand reaches for a stone, putting her in the position of the governess as well as the animator of the imagined Alice's actions, and we see that it is the live Alice who is disturbing the teacup, although exactly which Alice she is in the story is becoming very unclear already. The acousmatic sound of splashing water reveals its object but the object is in a complex fictional space.

Bored with her game, Alice rolls over onto her back, stares at a dull electric light,[68] but sits up when she hears a

[68] It is at this precise point, that Alice enters Wonderland, or, more prosaically, falls asleep. It is here that the action of the plot no longer represents that of the story. Presumably the "real" Alice is now asleep in her nursery, while the "dream" Alice heads off into Wonderland.

creaking sound. Once again the sound of an object precedes its appearance and Alice sees that the stuffed hare in its glass display cabinet, neatly labelled "*Lepus cuniculus* No. 23", has come to life and is freeing itself with its teeth from the nails which hold its paws down. Now the rabbit reaches down into the diorama of its cabinet and, gripping what appears to be a stone, draws out a wooden drawer. Inside the drawer is the White Rabbit's costume, which the rabbit proceeds to don. Finally the White Rabbit withdraws a large pair of scissors from the drawer and uses this to smash the side of the glass cabinet and escapes. The rabbit admires itself in a handy mirror but notices that there is a rip in its pelt out of which taxidermical sawdust is leaking. The Rabbit reaches inside itself and removes a pocket-watch, and declares, in Alice's voice, "Oh dear, oh dear! I shall be late!" and we then see the Alice narrator's lips as she finishes these words. The White Rabbit rushes across the nursery room floor which suddenly becomes an exterior field of clod. There is then a handheld point-of-view shot of the field ahead in which a table can be seen on the horizon. The Rabbit rushes to the table and claps its hands once, whereupon a drawer opens into which the Rabbit scrambles, uttering, via the narrator, once again his worries about being late. Alice follows the Rabbit into the clod field and similarly manages to reach the table but her hand clap has no effect on the drawer. She tries to pull open the drawer but only manages to pull off the drawer knob. She manages to open the drawer by hooking her finger into the resulting hole and finds that it is filled with mathematical apparatus (a nod to Lewis Carroll's other persona, the mathematics don, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson). Alice rummages through the drawer and is pricked on her finger by a set of dividers, which she casts aside. She then climbs into the impossibly small space of the drawer and disappears.

Alice has many interesting adventures in Wonderland. While these have been documented elsewhere (Hames 1995; Cardinal

1995; Drye; 1995, pp. 132-133; O'Pray, 1987, p 16; Švankmajer, 1987; Furniss, 1997; De Bruyn, 2002; Cherry, 2002), it can be noted here that Alice's changes in size often entail the changing of the live actress into an animated doll. Perhaps the most interesting of these changes is when she is turned into a sarcophagus-like doll within which the living Alice is trapped. Cherry writes:

> Alice undergoes the fragmentation of personality of the Gothic novel. Her alter egos both stand in for and enclose Alice herself […]. Like a nested Russian doll, she must escape from this *doppelganger* tomb. Thus, the doubling of Gothic romance occurs not once, but twice, in the figure of Alice. First as the live girl transforms and becomes the china doll; then as the effigy of Alice from which the child emerges once again. (Cherry, 2002, online)

What should be noted here is the way in which there always appears to be a further Alice within the one that we see and that the film constantly shifts from one level of fictionality to another. During her trial, for instance, the king and queen have the scripts for the film instead of law books and use these as evidence to try Alice. They also scold her for not following the script and point out her words in the script labelled with her name. However, as she is sentenced to have her head cut off, Alice wakes back in the nursery, covered in playing cards, and there follows a montage of the objects in the nursery that were animated in her dream. However, as she looks towards the White Rabbit's cabinet she sees that the glass is broken and the rabbit has indeed disappeared. She crawls over to the cabinet and draws out the drawer, which is now empty except for a pair of scissors. Alice picks these up and holds them in front of her face and examines them with a rather imperious look on her face. In voice-over, she says:

> He's late as usual, I think I'll cut *his* head off.

Alice's lips finally appear to say: "Thought Alice to herself" and the film ends with these lips curling into a

cruel smile. It is by now impossible to tell where the narrator ends and the narration begins. The only certainty we have is that a film has taken place but exactly what story the plot might be presenting to us is radically unstable. The film both exists and does not exist. The film itself, rather than the objects represented within it, is the fetish object. There is still, however, the image of the drawer in the table:

> These complex pieces [small boxes, chests, caskets] that a craftsman creates are very evident witnesses of the *need for secrecy*, of an intuitive sense of hiding places. It is not merely a matter of keeping a possession well guarded. The lock doesn't exist that could resist absolute violence, and all locks are invitations to thieves. A lock is a psychological threshold. (Bachelard, 1994, p, 81)

This, of course, is particularly pertinent to *Alice*. The film itself is structured like a box, or rather a table with a drawer and this structure, while initially that of the simple dream narrative, becomes radically complicated by the ending of the film when Alice wakes from her wonderland to realise that she is in fact the queen of this current world which is not the world in which she fell asleep. The secret of this new world is hidden in the mouth of the final close-up of Alice's lips as the screen fades to black (although which Alice is speaking this story is unknown). The wakened dreamer is being spoken from elsewhere. This should also recall Žižek's discussion of the dream of the butterfly. What is clear from *Alice* is that there seem to be an infinite number of dreamers, or narrators, and that when they wake it is only to find that they are being dreamt by something else. Here the narrator (the drawer, the frame) becomes the central non-centre of a tale that refuses to divulge its ultimate authority. Here we must understand the drawer, or the space of narration, as a figure of the unconscious (which becomes yet another name for the centring non-centre):

> The casket contains the things that are *unforgettable*, unforgettable for us, but also unforgettable for those to whom we are going to give our treasures. Here the past, the present and a future are condensed. Thus the casket is memory of what is immemorial. (Bachelard, 1994, p. 84)

"Immemorial", here, can be understood to mean both that which cannot be forgotten and at the same time that which it is impossible to remember.

> He who buries a treasure buries himself with it. A secret is a grave, and it is not for nothing that a man who can be trusted with a secret boasts that he is "like the grave". (Bachelard, 1994, p. 88)

5.9 *Faust* and Framing

> The uncanny is a qhostly feeling that arises (or doesn't arise), an experience that comes about (or doesn't) as an effect of reading. As Sarah Kofman observes: "[Freud's] aim being to prove the existence of themes capable of producing a universal feeling of uncanniness, he makes a strict thematic reading of the [literary fictional] texts he cites as proof of his hypothesis." But "it is really the form of the narrative and not the theme itself which plays the decisive role in the production of [uncanny] effects." (Royle, 2003, p. 44)

When Kofman argues that it is the "form of the narrative" rather than the substantive content of a story that produces an uncanny effect, the essence of this uncanny form is the basing of the story in the inexplicable. In other words, the centre of an uncanny narrative is not the centre, but the narrative nevertheless exists and is therefore uncannily based on something which is nothing: there is an absent cause of which the narrative is an effect. Thus when Todorov describes the fantastic (which, as I have argued elsewhere, we may equate with Freud's *unheimlich*) as sustaining ambiguity "even beyond the narrative itself" (Todorov, 1975, p. 43), this can be only be possible if the McGuffin of that narrative is not made apparent within the story itself. The plot circles around

an unexplained enigma. This leads to a proliferation of frames within which the story is presented, just as we have seen in *Alice*, and it is in *Faust* (*Lekce Faust*, 1994) that Švankmajer most explicitly explores this structure of narrative framing. The unanswered question of the uncanny narrative is: "Why?"

The story of *Faust* marks Švankmajer's own entry into the world of filmmaking after his initial training as a puppeteer. In 1958 he was one of the puppet handlers on *Johhanes Doktor Faust*, produced by Ústřední Půjčovna Filmů (the Central Film Library in Prague). He recalls:

> When I arrived at *Laterna magika*, Alfred Radok[69] had already been driven out. But his brother, Emil Radok, the "inventor" of Polyecran, was fortunately able to stay and, although he was many years older than me, we soon found we had much in common. As a fresh graduate of the puppetry faculty I worked with him on his film *Johannes doctor Faust*, inspired by folk puppet art. Collaboration on this film and other projects initiated by Radok meant a great deal to me. We discovered that we shared many views and we began to regularly write screenplays to put away "for a rainy day". (Hames, 1995, p. 97)

Radok's seventeen minute film actively foregrounds the constructed nature of the puppet theatre and throughout Radok makes certain that the puppets' strings, the puppeteers' hands and the dilapidated condition of all the material is brought to the attention of the spectator. Even the title itself is stencilled by a pair of hands which then remove the pattern to reveal the words. In many ways *Johannes Doktor Faust* is an anti-puppet film quite literally: puppets are ripped apart and their limbs float away into the dark, a puppet catches on fire and Faust himself, when he is carried away to damnation, is dismembered and his limbs fall back onto the stage. The

[69] For an account of Alfred Radok's life, "the best director of the Czech theatre", his institution of the multi-media Laterna Magika and subsequent fall from political favour, see Skvorecky (1971, pp. 40-42; also Hibbin, 1969, pp. 38-40; Liehm and Liehm, 1977, p. 103). His brother, Emil, is less well know and few sources mention him.

puppets are awkwardly manipulated and are often static in a confusing array of tableaus and clumsy scene changes. The artifice of the puppet theatre is mercilessly exposed and the hubris of Faust's desire for absolute power is aligned with the film's attempt at presenting a convincing illusion of life.

The content of Švankmajer's *Faust* (and the story's origin in Goethe, Marlowe, Grabbe and Gounod) has been documented elsewhere,[70] but I wish to examine more carefully three points in the film which explicitly play with the notion of illusion. The film begins, like *Alice*, with sound over the initial production credit: a choir sings and is interrupted by the shaking metal tray thunder of opera. This mimicry of the sound of a storm ushers in a montage of alchemical etchings which are brutally intercut with a static, almost *ciné verité* shot of an exit to the Prague Metro. Shots of

[70] This may serve as good a summary as any: "A man wandering the streets of present day Prague is presented with a mysterious plan which indicates a certain house in the city. In the cellar of this house the man discovers a deserted theatre dressing room and a soiled edition of Goethe's *Faust*. Putting on Faust's classic costume and reading aloud from the opening dialogue, what begins as a game becomes reality and the man finds himself in an alchemist's laboratory. Encouraged by two untrustworthy characters, the man Faust is initiated into a world of Black Magic and summons Mephisto who promises to serve him. Faust is plunged into Gounod's opera about himself and in a dream experiences flying through the Cosmos - through the Microcosm, then the Macrocosm, through Heaven and Hell. Determined to have a good time, Faust visits the King of Portugal and conjures up David and Goliath. Mephisto sends Helen of Troy to seduce Faust. His passion aroused, Faust traps Helen in a cluttered props room. He throws himself upon her only to discover that he has been making love to a wooden marionette in the shape of a repulsive devil. Faust's time is up as the clock strikes twelve. Fire breaks out and the King of Hell invades Faust's dressing room. The corridors echo with the sound of the Devil's laughter as Faust flees for his life. Reaching the safety of the streets of Prague, Faust lights a cigarette to calm his nerves and steps out into the road…" (Anon., 1994, p. 16). The same author gives this background to the film's production: "Alain Yentob (Controller BBC 1) and Michael Jackson (Controller BBC 2) supported the production of Svankmajer's BAFTA nominated film 'The Death of Stalinism in Bohemia' and through Colin Rose's award winning Animation Unit at BBC Bristol enthusiastically agreed to co-produce with Koninck Jan's second feature *Faust*" (1994, p. 17). The film is also discussed in O'Pray (1994), who particularly stresses the film's connection with the 16th century British occultists, Dee and Michael Roydon; Romney (1994); Nesselson (1994), who laments the live-action element in the film.

the etchings are accompanied by the faux thunder roll. Two men are seen handing out copious quantities of a leaflet before we cut back to the Metro and see our mundane Faust (Petr Čepek) emerge. He is handed one of the map leaflets which he discards and goes on to enter his dilapidated flat building, pick up his mail and open his front door. He is confronted by an agitated black chicken which runs out of the building. Inside he finds his floor covered in bird faeces, which he messily cleans up, before sitting down to a supper of bread and preserves. He finds another copy of the map in his mail. As he cuts a slice from the bread he notices that there is an egg embedded in it. Faust removes the egg and cracks it open, only to find nothing inside. However, as he does so, the room goes dark, a wind howls through the open window, the furniture moves around and we hear thunder. Faust rushes over to close the window and sees the two men, who had been handing out the maps earlier, looking up at him while stroking the black chicken. Their eyes are glazed over and resemble the egg that Faust has just discovered. He returns to his desk and takes out a map of Prague and compares it to the one on the leaflet. The camera shows us the two men outside removing fake white contacts from their eyes and placing them into a matchbox. The film now puts us into a position where we know more than Faust and it appears that he is the subject of some elaborate jape or swindle.

The next day Faust follows the map and, nearly being knocked over by a fleeing man in the process, enters the theatre in which much of the film takes place. Here he takes on the role of Faust, picking up a charred, blue script along the way. The action in the theatre is staged as a dazzlingly complicated series of plays within plays and the puppets with which he interacts are clearly shown to be controlled by some unknown puppeteer. After a series of encounters with alchemical golems and Mephistopheles, Faust suddenly emerges into the everyday streets of Prague and immediately spots the two men handing out leaflets. He

bumps into a derelict, the same man who had been the caretaker at the theatre, who appears to be carrying a severed human leg wrapped in newspaper. Passing a blind accordion player (one of the leafleters), Faust enters a beer garden where he is brought some dumplings by the other leafleter, now dressed as a waiter. After eating, and finding a key in his food, Faust is given a large hand-drill by the waiter as well as a wine glass. He is encouraged to drill into the table and when he does so red wine gushes forth. He drinks a glass and leaves, realising that he now has access to certain magical powers. After he has left, the group of men who had been playing cards at an adjacent table, rush forward to drink from the fountain of wine but the waiter frowns and turns off the tap which controls the stream. Faust is being led to believe in something that is merely an illusion.

After a forced return to the theatre where Faust indulges in some complicated puppet sex,[71] the horde of demons finally comes to take Faust to his doom but he rushes out of the building, nearly knocking over another man who has just entered clutching the map leaflet, and runs into the street where he is run over by a car (which had appeared in an earlier section of the film as the devil's ride). The scavenging caretaker appears and removes Faust's leg while the two leafleters look on with wry smiles. A policeman arrives and opens the car's door to confront the driver: there is no-one inside.

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[71] Peta Allen Shera's long and detailed exploration of sexuality in the film and its relation to the "exquisite corpse" of surrealism finally finds the film uninteresting since the "act of filming provides Švankmajer's puppet bodies with an uncanny semblance of life. Yet Helen also falls inanimate after Faustus' seduction, and, by so doing, plays an exquisite corpse. With an absence of romantic figures in the film and Faustus' ultimate disgust at his encounter with Helen, Švankmajer reveals a world in which the body of woman suggests dread and absence. This is a form of surrealism utterly lacking in the subversively purposeful, redemptive drive towards love that Breton held as the movement's delirious challenge" (2001, p. 141). I would argue that Shera has missed the absurd humour of the film.

Švankmajer had toyed with three different endings to the film. He writes in his shooting diary on the 21st of September:

> In the cutting room today I decided how to end the film. We have made three versions of the end. The last shot: the first version is as in the screenplay, i.e. the devil puppet is sitting in the car. The second version has the devil and the angel puppets sitting in the car. In the third version the car is empty. In the end I decided on the empty car. It seems to best express the initial Nothing of the ancient philosophers. The Indian "It" or the Egyptian "Nun". "Osiris is the black god, whom we never recognise", initiates shouted into the ear of an initiate at the top, as the highest revelation. It corresponds better to the emphasis on the importance of the puppeteer's hands, the hands of the Great Operator. The devil and angel puppets, meanwhile, are merely controlled props, mere symbols of manipulation in the right and left hand of one Puppeteer. (p. xi)

The duping of Faust by the leafleters becomes analogous to the duping of the audience by Švankmajer. The film is ultimately based around the "initial Nothing" and thus *Faust* is a damned piece of work but the only possible one in the face of the abyss. The film is its own redemption, but finally points to the impossibility of seeing or knowing the Puppeteer except in his effects, special or otherwise. The tables are turned in more ways than one and in *Faust* and table turning here is once again evidence of another world – although the film throughout plays on undermining the claims made for the supernatural. Almost every effect is revealed to be a special effect, and it is impossible to forget that we are watching an animated film, a film that is in itself a special effect. This special effect is reproduced in the framed, circular narrative structure. Fictional narrative is revealed to be little more than such an effect, an illusion which purports to have meaning.

5.10 *Flora* and Architorture[72]

Faust has also been discussed in terms of its presentation of Prague. O'Pray writes:

> And finally *Faust* is a homage to Prague itself - the Surrealists' "magical city" - but here the director's camera avoids the magnificent baroque buildings and focuses instead on the dilapidated courtyards, winding staircases, seedy hallways and bustling streets: the urban geography of the flaneur. (p. 20)

Romney thinks that the film explores the "unconscious of the city itself" and that it is "when *Faust* hits the street - and more to the point, when the street hits Faust - that the film most invokes Marlowe's great contribution to the hit of literary catch-phrases: "Why, this is hell, nor are we out of it" (p. 33). There is, of course, only hell. Nevertheless, it may be useful to consider in some more detail the way in which Švankmajer imagines the material city.

Surrealism has always been associated with a certain urban experience. An introduction to surrealism begins: "Surrealism is a collective adventure which began in Paris…" (Cardinal and Short, 1970, p. 9). The large cities of Europe are vitally linked to the history of surrealism and very often appear in the works of the surrealists either as places of magical and often ruined wonder or as threatening and foreboding sites filled with lurking, unknowable desires (Caws, 1997). The surrealist is often seen as a jaded flâneur, whose sophisticated palate requires rather more titillating fare than that offered by the surface of the city - thus the celebrated interest in hidden or forgotten spaces, dead-end streets, sleazy bars and flea-markets filled with the signs of some other life going on elsewhere. Even when the surrealist wanders into the country or the jungle it is only to discern a certain

[72] A version of this section appeared under the title "Architorture: Jan Švankmajer and Surrealist Film" in the book *Screening the City* (Sorfa, 2003).

anthropomorphic exoticism that might reinvigorate the ennui of the urbane dweller.

More than individual countries, it is the cities - Berlin, Paris, Prague, Geneva, London, Madrid, Chicago - that are associated with surrealist activity. Although it may be enticing to imagine that this magnetic attraction of the city is itself intrinsically surrealist it is more probable that those who enjoy the title of "surrealist" are more often than not bourgeois intellectuals who would find themselves travelling to the cities to attend universities or to find associated employment. In addition, since surrealism considers group activity to be central to its endeavours, it follows that any aspiring surrealist would need to be near other surrealists in order to be inducted into the order. The city, then, is both an imaginary and practical surrealist space happily providing both the economic means for survival and the raw material for surrealist exploration. From De Chirico's empty squares to Magritte's suburban conundrums, the surrealist city embodies the central contradiction of urban life: the city as civilisation and as destroyer of the civilised. Sigmund Freud's evocation of the uncanny and the city seems to capture the romantic vertigo of the surrealists:

> As I was walking, one hot summer afternoon, through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was unknown to me, I found myself in a quarter of whose character I could not long remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a time without enquiring my way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, only to arrive by another *détour* at the same place yet a third time. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad enough to find myself back at the piazza I had left a short while before, without any further voyages of discovery. (Freud, 1990, p. 359)

Although the paradigmatic surrealist city must be Paris, there is no doubt that Prague, especially in the latter half of the 20th century, has an equal if not greater resonance for surrealist activity. André Breton, who visited the city with Paul Eluard in 1935, echoed Guillaume Appollinaire in calling Prague "the magical capital of Europe" (a phrase which, of course, is now the preferred cliché of travel guidebooks) and established close links with contemporary Czech surrealists such as Toyen (Marie Čerminová), her partner, Jindrich Štýrský, and Karel Teige, "the very incarnation of intelligence, culture and the struggle for a better world, the founder and incomparable animator of the surrealist group in Prague" (Breton, 1975, p. 209). Breton goes on to eulogise Prague as that place of "intense and unparalleled seething of ideas and hopes, those impassioned exchanges at human level aspiring to wed poetry and revolution, while the gulls claimed the Vltava in every direction to make stars spurt out" (Breton, 1975, p. 209; O'Pray, 1987, p. 10).

The surrealist group in Czechoslovakia developed out of the loose 1920s avant-garde collective, *Devetsil* (The Nine Souls), and although officially established in 1934 by the poet, Viteslav Nezval, it was Teige who soon became the group's "dominant figure".[73] Closely allied to the French group and taking Breton's Second Manifesto as its template, the group was briefly productive until 1938 when a combination of internal dissent (with Nezval attempting to dissolve the group) and the imminent Nazi occupation silenced the surrealists throughout the war years.

[73] For a more detailed history of this period see Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (1996). A good overview of the group's activities is provided in Josef Janda's "On the Reverse Side of History" (1998). See also František Šmejkal's "From Lyrical Metaphors to Symbols of Fate: Czech Surrealism in the 1930s" (1989). The most comprehensive account of this period of Czech Surrealism can be found in the monumental *Český surrealismus 1929-1953. skupina surrealistů v ČSR : události, vztahy, inspirace* (*Czech Surrealism 1929-1953. The Surrealist Group in the Czechoslovak Republic: Events, Relationships, Inspiration*) (Bydžovská and Srp, 1996). There is also a discussion of eroticism in pre-war Czech surrealism by Jennifer Mundy (2001, p. 239).

Unsuccessful attempts were made to revive the group after 1945. In 1951 Teige died of a heart attack at which point the theorist Vratislav Effenberger took over leadership of the group. Many of the original surrealists were either dead or had emigrated and although the group now attracted new members it was not until the political thaw of the 1960s that surrealist activity became coherent and forceful. The Soviet invasion of Prague in 1968 did not at first affect surrealist activity, but with the publication of the first issue of the journal *Analogon* in 1969 the group was effectively put into stasis until *Analogon's* second issue could be published in 1990, almost as if the intervening 21 years had not occurred.[74]

It was in 1970 at the beginning of this hidden period that Jan Švankmajer and his wife, the painter-poet Eva Švankmajerová, joined the group and it may be fair to say that it is through Švankmajer's films that the group's importance has been established outside Czechoslovakia. Švankmajer himself had come from a background as a puppeteer at Prague's *Laterna Magica* and an involvement with "trick" films. Perhaps Švankmajer's greatest contribution to the group in Czechoslovakia has been his interest in "Rudolfine Mannerism", characterised by the archival excesses of Rudolf II, who presided in Prague as the Holy Roman Emperor from 1576 until 1612, and the composite paintings of his court painter, Arcimboldo (although these influences had been an earlier feature of the photography of Emila Medková).[75] It is clear from many of his films that Švankmajer's fascination with Rudolf's bizarre and haphazard Kunstkammer collections of art and natural objects has contributed to the surrealist destruction of the distinction between artifice and nature. Švankmajer works in a variety of media aside from film,

[74] The group was still active to some extent in the 1970s and 80s and Alena Nádvorníková documents this period in "Surrealistická Skupina v Československu [The Surrealist Group in Czecholovakia]" (1995).

[75] Interview with Švankmajer by František Drye, April 1997, in Švankmajer and Švankmajer (1998, p. 33).

including ceramics, composite sculpture, printing, etching and writing, reflecting the Surrealist Group's insistence on heterogeneity and experimentation.[76]

For the Czech and Slovak Surrealists in general and Švankmajer in particular, Prague is central both to their physical existence and to their surrealist practice. *Analogon* 18 (III, 1996) is dedicated to the experience of Prague and entitled "*Praha Skrz Prsty*/Prague Through Our Fingers", highlighting the notion that one can only ever approach the city obliquely and that the meaning of the city will always slip through one's grasp. In that issue, Krzysztof Fijalkowski comments on his experience as a tourist in Prague:

> Beneath the impression of an extraordinary poetic beauty that many of its native citizens have probably long since tired of hearing about from its visitors and tourist agencies, Prague also presents a city of pathways, of secret maps as knotted and inexorable as its network of tramlines; of half-erased painted signs and faces emerging from walls and torn posters; of invitations and admonitions that...make the whole metropolis a giant skein of palimpsests, from centre to suburb. (Fijalkowski, 1996, p. 133)

It is possible to consider many of Švankmajer's films as explorations of this "secret map" which is used to undermine any sense of totalitarian explanation or understanding: two of his four feature films, *Faust* (1994) and *Conspirators of Pleasure* (1996), are explicitly set in Prague. In a political sense, then, the work of the surrealists in and on Prague can be seen as undermining the concept of a rational city that could be perfectly designed and planned. Paradoxically, both the programmed and the surreal city embody a certain experience of the sinister and occult: the threat of the rational city coming from a fear of external control and surveillance while the menace

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[76] For a comprehensive catalogue of Švankmajer's work, see Michael Brooke's exhaustive website: *Jan Švankmajer: Alchemist of the Surreal* <http://www.illumin.co.uk/svank/index.html> (1 April 1998).

of the surrealist city emerges from the unconscious of its inhabitants. It is this perilous nature of the city that will be discussed here.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault writes that "At the beginning of the nineteenth century...the great spectacle of physical punishment disappeared; the tortured body was avoided; the theatrical representation of pain was excluded from punishment" (1991, p. 14). Leaving aside questions about the historical accuracy of this statement, and it must be remembered that Foucault is making quite a specific point about the history of punishment in France, this paper will explore the idea that the "theatrical representation of pain" (pain in a very broad sense) has been again placed into the public domain through the agency of film, that most spectacular of 20th century media. Although this discussion is based mainly on Švankmajer's work, there is a much wider history to the representation of pain, suffering and torture in the cinema that has been somewhat mapped in writings on horror and fantastic film: from the broadly psychoanalytic approach favoured by Barbara Creed in her by now canonical *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993) and by Carol Clover's *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (1992) to Steven Shaviro's attempted post-structural valorisation of the visceral in *The Cinematic Body* 1993) and to the exploitation academia of David Kerekes and David Slater's *Killing for Culture* (1994). Most of these theorists are concerned either with explaining an audience's fascination with disturbing images and narratives or, in Kerekes and Slater's case, providing a history of obscure and cult films. My interest here is to examine a fairly small body of work produced by and surrounding Švankmajer in order to explore the ramifications of a single idea: architorture.

Švankmajer made *Flora,* a short 20 second film, in 1989 for MTV, and it will be useful to begin by providing a shot by shot breakdown of the piece. The central image of the film

is the body of the goddess, Flora, made up of an Arcimboldo-esque collocation of vegetables and fruit and tied with ropes to a metal bed, which Michael Brooke describes as "clearly a hospital bed". The head, hands and feet are made of the smooth grey clay which features in many of Švankmajer's animations. Through the use of time-lapse photography, reminiscent of Peter Greenaway's *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985), the organic matter rots throughout the duration of the film. The bed to which the figure is tied, perhaps playfully recalling Marcel Duchamp's *Apolinère enameled* (1916/17), is positioned in the corner of a room with dirty walls and a glass of water stands on a small table next to the imprisoned figure.

Although the reference to Flora as goddess of the spring is very clear in the film, there is a firm evocation of "Flora", one of the underground Metro stations of Prague. While the film is claustrophobically concentrated on the bound figure, the city, like the glass of water, is tantalisingly close. So, as Flora lies tied to the bed, the

sound of the traffic of Flora is heard from outside. Thus Flora is both inside and outside the room; is both the antithesis of the city and the very heart of the city; is absolutely immobile and also one of the nodes of mobility that allows movement within (but not out of) the city.

One of the few references to this film in the rather extensive commentary available on Švankmajer is in Michael O'Pray's "Jan Švankmajer: a Bohemian Surrealist" in which O'Pray writes that *Flora* "uses the natural corruption of flowers to reveal simultaneously a sexual sadism and a sarcastic comment on modern civilization's rape of the natural world" (1992, p. 21). Although Švankmajer's Flora is constituted mainly of vegetables and fruit and not flowers as O'Pray remembers, the film is easily read as this form of admonitory allegory: technological progress bringing about the inevitable destruction of an imagined pastoral harmony. I wish, however, to concentrate more carefully on the *mise-en-scène* of this suitably short film and to show how this particular representation of the urban environment as prison and as torture reverberates through Švankmajer's other work and in some other surrealist film and literature. There is a claim here that the surrealist sensibility (and there seems to be a profound difficulty in understanding what surrealism might actually be, a difficulty which is perhaps the core of surrealism as such) constantly explores the idea of the "human" within the context of the city and of the existence of a body in a room or on the street. The surrealist fascination and hatred of the city is perhaps best expressed in Breton's famous explanation of surrealism:

> The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. (Breton, 1998, p. 125)

In *Flora* there is no narrative to explain who the unfortunate goddess's gaoler might be or how long the figure has been tied to the grubby bed. The camera dissects

the body both in space and in time, as hands, feet and eyes are presented for the audience's pornographic examination and the anthropomorphic vegetable body flowers into decay – an ironic and sterile blooming. The final cut to the unreachable glass of water (with vague echoes of Travis Bickle's fizzing glass in *Taxi Driver* [Martin Scorsese, 1976] and Jean Luc Godard's coffee cup in *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* [1967]) emphasises the helplessness of the animated figure and the sadism of the camera – a snuff movie involving vegetables. Rather than the fascinating figure tied to the bed, it is the room and the noise of the city's traffic that is of interest. The room, if one is given to metaphoric explication, could be seen as the city, and thus civilisation, as a whole (this would be O'Pray's reading) or could, on the other hand, be the virtual skull of any one of that city's inhabitants – and in this reading the only countryside or natural habitat that exists is already imprisoned within the psyche as a fantasy of the possibility of escape – an escape which is only ever nostalgic. Rob Lapsley writes:

> As real, the city is the city impossible of achievement. Although many people plainly prefer life in the city to any available alternative, for all inhabitants there is a non-coincidence between the actually existing city and their ideal, and consequently a sense of non-belonging. In the order of the real, therefore, the city is the impossibility of home; although there was no home prior to the city, a sense of homelessness is engendered by the city. (Lapsley, 1997, p. 192)

It is this sense of homelessness that is at the centre of *architorture* – a primal sense of loss; a loss that has lost nothing, that has always already existed and that, like Baudrillard's simulacrum, has no origin or original, but underpins the very possibility of existence. For Flora there is no escape since her existence is predicated on her imprisonment and it is the very shortness of the film *Flora* that leaves an image of constant, rather than teleological, decay. It is this paradoxically endless disintegration that the film seems to encapsulate. Surrealism's relationship

with the city here is not one of antipathy or love, but one where both of these attitudes exist simultaneously and without contradiction. Breton, again, observes:

> Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point. From this it becomes obvious how absurd it would be to define surrealism solely as constructive or destructive: the point to which we are referring is *a fortiori* that point where construction and destruction can no longer be brandished one against the other. (Breton, 1998, pp. 123-124)

Christian Metz points out that "There is always a moment after the obvious observation that it is man who makes the symbol when it is also clear that the symbol makes man: this is one of the great lessons of psychoanalysis, anthropology and linguistics" (Metz, 1982, p. 20). The significance of this for a consideration of the city and the subject is the insight that, in Anthony Easthope's words: "since subject and object are always produced together, the quality and design of city space will pose reciprocally a certain position and definition for the subject" (Easthope, 1997, p. 130) Flora does not exist without *Flora*. Jacques Derrida makes clear this imbrication of self in architecture and architecture in self:

> [The event] does not happen to a constituted *us*, to a human subjectivity whose essence would be arrested and which would *then* find itself affected by the history of this thing called architecture. We appear to ourselves only through an experience of spacing which is already marked by architecture. What happens through architecture both constructs and instructs this *us*. The latter *finds itself* engaged by architecture before it becomes the subject of it: master and possessor. (Derrida, 1997, p. 322)

Anthony Vidler makes a similar point when he refers to *Being and Nothingness*: "Sartre's body participates in a

world within which it has to be immersed and to which it has to be subjected even before it can recognize itself as a body. It knows itself precisely because it is defined in relation to instrumental complexes that themselves are threatened by other instruments, understood as 'destructive devices.'...Thus…in Sartrean terms the body is only seen to exist by virtue of the existence of the house: 'it is only in a world that there can be a body'" (Vidler, 1992, pp. 82-83). It is this absolute and necessary relationship between self and architecture that, in denying any prior or privileged existence to the subject, underlies the sense of loss and lostness in surrealist film. If we are no longer allowed to assume that humanity exists in some way before coming into its environment, we are left mourning for that which was never alive: the autonomous human subject. However, since grieving the loss of something that did not exist is patently ridiculous, this grief becomes humorous in the surrealist world.

It is the comedy of life as a prison that animates Švankmajer's earlier comic film, *Byt/The Flat* (1968). In this film the protagonist (Ivan Kraus) is thrown into a dungeon-like flat only to find that normal physical rules no longer seem to apply: the tap drips stones, eggs have an astonishingly destructive power and objects in general seem to have developed a wicked sense of humour. The flat and its objects tease their hapless victim with the possibility of food, sleep and escape until a door collapses only to reveal a further wall covered with the signatures of past artists to which Kraus adds his name. The room itself is here mischievously malevolent but it is clear that nothing exists outside of that room. In Švankmajer's 1989 *Tma-svétlo-tma/Darkness-Light-Darkness*, a body assembles itself in a room as various body parts enter, only to find that the complete person can barely fit into its room. In these films the central figure finds itself within an architectural structure that both defines and confines that figure's existence but which could not exist outside of that structure.

Švankmajer uses the room and the city as a metaphor for the tragi-comedy of existence itself: a being-in-the-world which is always somehow not quite what it should be and it is just such an uncomfortable existence that the city is often used to represent. David Clarke observes:

> The modern city was...the world as experienced by the stranger, and the experience of a world populated by strangers – a world in which a universal strangehood was coming to predominate. (Clarke, 1997, p. 4)

The individual in surrealist film is always a stranger and, like Kafka's bemused protagonists, wanders through a landscape that has no map and that seems unfathomably intent on doing the subject harm (it is this sense of dread, of architorture, that reflects the anxiety of the subject in the recognition of the misrecognition,

méconnaissance, of its own autonomy). The very seriousness of this anxiety is so fundamental that is laughable.

In this architorture of the surrealist individual we find ourselves in the realm of the uncanny, the *unheimlich*, the unhomely, of *Hausangst*, which, while perhaps not being exactly homelessness is more of a homesickness[77] without a hope of ever finding oneself at home. Perhaps the cinema of architorture and the oppressive buildings that do its bidding place the audience in a position of anxiety that forces the spectator to explore again Foucault's "theatrical representation of pain". The unsettling of the viewer is for Švankmajer part of the project that Andrew Benjamin calls for in a recent paper, a project for "developing an ontology of original displacement" (1999): a continuing reminder that there's no place like home.

5.11 *Conspirators of Pleasure*: Exchange and Desire

Of all Švankmajer's films, *Conspirators of Pleasure* (1996) is the most overtly concerned with sexual fetishism and with desire. The film follows the lives of six characters who are variously connected (one couple are married, two live opposite each other, one delivers the post to one of these and the last sells magazines in the same area (see Felperin (1997) for a full summary). Each of these characters construct some sort of prosthetic device through which to gain sexual pleasure (straw effigies, Max Ernst-inspired costumes, rolling pins hammered with nails and covered in feathers, rolled up balls of bread to be inhaled through the nose, a tub of carp, a crudely technological masturbation machine) and much of the film charts the way

[77] Freud in "The Uncanny": "There is a joking saying that 'Love is home-sickness'; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: 'This place is familiar to me, I've been here before', we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body. In this case too, then, the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, familiar; the prefix *'un'* is the token of repression" (1990, p. 368).

in which each character finally completes the machine of his or her own particular desire and achieves climax. Švankmajer writes:

> The characters in the film are clearly dominated by the pleasure principle. The "harmless" imaginative perversions of individuals are confronted with the monstrous perversions of civilization, such as politics, war, peace conferences, ethnic cleansing, accidents and plagues. What in the individual leads to a freeing of desire (at least temporarily), leads in civilization as a whole (in other words, when it is collectivized) to slavery and mass killings. (Švankmajer, 1997, p. 18)

Thus while he celebrates the autonomous pleasures that these individuals seek which are seen to be in some way subversive of mass culture ("From the point of view of these masses and their manipulators, each attempt at a free, imaginative act of desire (pleasure) has to be a manifestation of perversity" (Švankmajer, 1997, p. 18)), he argues that if this strategy was adopted as a political solution it would be immediately transformed into its opposite. When, in an interview, Jonathan Romney makes the comment: "I'm interested in this idea that Sade represents absolute freedom, because one of the most important things about Sade is that the logic is that, if I decide to be absolutely free, then that always involves the oppression of the other whose will is not as strong", Švankmajer answers: "That is the tragic contradiction of absolute freedom. Because it is impossible to fulfil" (Romney, 1997, p. 59). A freedom for the individual can never be, in this analysis, a freedom for all because one can never be certain that everyone will desire the same thing. It is in the aggressive marketing of what a political system imagines to be common pleasure that Švankmajer sees an implicit totalitarianism.

Švankmajer, in *Conspirators of Pleasure*,[78] shows six people

[78] Švankmajer explains some his references: "With Sade and Freud it's evident. Buñuel is in because I feel analogies with his film, *The Phantom of Liberty*. In the case of Max Ernst, the bat

whose pleasures are taken outside of the system of desire provided for them by capitalism (pornographic magazines are used to make papier-mâché masks, radio electronics altered to create a televisual masturbator, latex finger protectors become tactile exciters) but the ending of the film makes clear that they themselves are functioning within a similar system of exchange. Mr Pivonka (Petr Meissel), the straw figure fetishist, becomes mesmerised by the newscaster (Anna Wetlinská) who had been the newsagent, Kula's (Jirí Lábus), object of fascination. The postwoman (Barbora Hrzánová) is seen peering intently at a tank full of carp, while the newsagent himself is busy gluing feathers onto rolling pins. However their little perversions have not been exchanged unchanged. Kula uses the feathers and chicken blood that Pivonka had used to fashion his LopLop mask ritual in conjunction with the rolling pin, creating some unimagined third excitement. Pivonka arrives home to find his neighbour, Mrs. Loubalová (Gabriela Wilhelmová), being carried out of their apartment block, apparently killed in his own fantasised murder of her effigy. As Pivonka looks into Loubalová's flat, he notices the police officer, Beltinski (Pavel Nový), fondling the coat that Loubalová had used in her own erotic scenario. Beltinksi gives Pivonka a meaningful look as he strokes a black cat and Pivonka stares at the policeman's umbrella (an object that had played a part in Pivonka's exercises).[79] In his own flat, Pivonka discovers candles and the tub of water used by Loubalová to drown her effigy of him (although there is no way that Pivonka could know this). In an imitation of Loubalová's sadistic scene, Pivonka begins slowly to undress and closes his eyes in anticipation. The camera

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with the bird's head is Loplop, who appears in a number of his pictures and collages. Then there is the Czech surrealist Bohuslav Brouk, who was a controversial theorist of psychoanalysis and philosopher in the thirties. He was a member of the surrealist group between the two wars and he published a number of books, that's why I give him a credit in this film, because he wrote *Autosexuality and Eroticism*, which was published in the surrealist edition" (Romney, 1997, p. 56)

[79] As well as allowing Švankmajer the opportunity to present the literal meeting of umbrella and sewing machine on a dissecting table (Lautréamont, 1994, p. 193).

shows us the candles reflecting in the tub before panning right to catch the cupboard doors slowly creaking open. The screen fades to black.

What at first had been a conspiracy of pleasure has now become a conspiracy of fear and death. However, the point is not so much that these individuals' relationship to objects has provided them in some odd way with a sort of pleasure, but rather that the film itself fulfils this purpose for its audience. Its presentation of impossible situations and ill-understood events makes it the "odd object" that the connoisseur of cinema seeks out in order to satisfy a barely understood desire. In doing so the filmgoer both finds freedom and gives it up. He or she desires to desire purely, but to desire at all means to desire impurely.

5.12 *Otesánek*: Consumexcrete

It is in Švankmajer's *Otesánek* (*Little Otik*, 2000), based on the 19th century children's story by K. J. Erben (2000), that the filmmaker explores the idea of desire as a paradoxically destructive force.[80] A childless couple, Božena and Karel Horák (Veronika Zilková and Jan Hartl), in modern day Prague are desperate to have a child but cannot conceive. Karel finds a wooden root at their country cottage and fashions this into a grotesque baby which Božena begins to treat as a living child. The stump comes to life and the Horáks take it back to Prague where their young neighbour, Alžbětka (Kristina Adamcová), befriends Otesánek even though he is now devouring everything in sight, including people. Finally, Otesánek, now monstrously huge, begins to eat the caretaker's cabbages. She goes down

[80] The main themes that Švankmajer is interested in his work are well summed up by the chapter titles of his book with Eva, *Evasvankmajerjan* (1998): eros and thanatos; historia naturae; touch and gesture; manipulation and the puppet; alchemy and magic; games and dreams; the arcimboldo principle; the increased difficulty of communication.

with a hoe and the film fades to black as she descends the stairs. The film contains numerous scenes of food consumption (a common motif in many of his films, especially *Food* (*Jídlo*, 1992) as well as "mock [television] commercials that crassly decry other products (Flora Flour is best because 'all the rest have worms', says one" (Felperin, 2001, p. 50)). The film, featuring an animated version of Erben's story drawn by Eva Švankmajerová,[81] was always a collaboration between the married couple. Švankmajer says:

> In the early 70s Eva was looking for a "drastic" fairytale that she could make into an animated short film. *Otesánek* was her final choice; she had illustrated the story earlier for a children's book. She asked me to help with the script, and suddenly I realised what a great subject I was handling. That it was, in effect, a topical version of the Faust myth: a rebellion against nature and the tragic dimension of that rebellion. In short, I stole the story from Eva and subsequently integrated her original idea into the final shape of my script. (Hames, 2001, p.28)

The basis of both *Faust* and *Otesánek* is desire (for power, for children) and it is this which appears to be the initial cause of tragedy. The paradox of desire is that it consumes that which would satisfy it and is in continual need of more fuel. In many ways, this may be seen as a metaphor for any artistic project: the desire to create an object will, at least according to the parable of *Otesánek,* be reproduced in that object, just as the Horák's desire for a child creates a child that desires everything – it has a hollow at its centre that is impossible to fill. There is a certain attraction in surrealism to the idea of consumption (using both the detritus of commercial culture

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[81] Jan Švankmajer: "Erben's tale read by Alžbětka is an independent animated short that has an important role in the film, in that it gives the spectator a clear picture of the original myth, unadulterated by the deformations of present-day society. It is this that provides the source of Alžbětka's "knowledge" and her "counter-activity". Thus animated, the Erben tale could stand on its own (with minor alterations) as an independent short film. It's a film within a film" (Hames, 2001, p. 28)

- pornographic magazines, mannequins, newspapers, advertisements - and the image of consumption itself - eating, voracious sexuality) which often seems to be linked to the idea of cannibalism and self-destruction (Salvador Dalí's *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)* (1936) may be emblematic here). This process of consumption is also linked to the alchemical notion of transmutation and refinement (as in the first part of Švankmajer's *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982)) and this in turn can be analogous to the activity of analysis: taking raw material and working through it until a coherent answer is provided. The paradox of this is that that which is produced (or excreted) is now the apotheosis of uselessness: shit rather than gold. Švankmajer's argument in *Dimensions of Dialogue* seems clearly to be that communication is impossible since it is based on consumption and that to indulge in communication is to participate in the destruction of both that which you are attempting to communicate and the person with whom you are communicating (see, for instance, Švankmajer's sculpture *Autocannibalismus* (1994) in which a lump of clay gouges at itself with spoons). Švankmajer's collages of masturbation machines indicate similar closed systems.

Perhaps the earliest publication of sections of the script for *Otesánek* appeared in issue 14 of *Analogon* (the issue's subtitle is "Picture of a Person: Mutations, Variations") in 1995 (pp. 72 - 73). What is distinctive about the structure of the film (and this is a structure that appears in all of Švankmajer's films apart from *Conspirators of Pleasure*) is the use of a very distinctive framing device: in *Alice* (1988), Alice reads her own story; in *Faust* the protagonist reads the story of Faust which then becomes his own story. Švankmajer sees myths as in some way constitutive of consciousness. Here I am slightly cautious of his mystical and ahistorical tendency: "The old myths are closely connected with our psyche, as well as with the physical world around us and its laws. The myths are still

with us - they are merely drowned out by the squealing of the touts and peddlers of today's trends" (in Hames, 2001, p. 28).

Švankmajer describes surrealism (both in the 1920s and 30s and particularly today) as being a "minority affair".[82] It is no great leap of logic to see that he sees contemporary surrealism as part of the old myths that are challenging today's consumer culture. There is a certain irony here in that prints of the paintings of the surrealists, particularly those of Dali, are now ubiquitous thanks to cheap reproduction. The consumption of these images is, I think, based largely on an understanding of the strong romantic bias of surrealism - the promise or hope of another, better, more exciting world - although this view is contested by Marc LaFountain:

> Life today is driven by trends and fashions. Television, commercial film and advertising are continually telling us how to live, and above all how to consume, because that is the only way our civilisation can - just about - keep going. It is in the interest of these "noble" aims that these trends be constantly changed. Something which a year ago was in fashion, and thus the object of desire, is today passé and thus contemptible. And so today's trends, in the interest of increasing consumption (and thus production, and most of all, of course, profit) are short-term (and getting shorter), superficial and incapable of penetrating the psyche in any profound way (LaFountain, 1997).

Otesánek can be seen to play in an ambiguous way with this problematic formulation of myth and civilisation. While the culture of consumption is seen as rapacious and destructive and therefore an aberration, it is also the unconscious and mythical foundation of civilisation (or perhaps of

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[82] "Surrealism has always been a minority affair, even in the 30s. In so far as it was perceived at all it was considered to be an abscess on the body of Czech culture. Today the rabid attacks of the fascist establishment and Stalinist lackeys have been replaced by indifference and ignorance. For art historians surrealism has long been dead, which is why they are only interested in historical surrealism and ignore the present movement. I do not think we are in danger of 'recognition'" (Hames, 2001, p. 28).

humanity) itself. Thus when Švankmajer claims that: "*Otesánek* is still with us, eating us. Perhaps as a punishment for the mess we have made of our civilisation", it is difficult to see why Otesánek is given this historical dimension when he is supposedly an expression of some sort of "collective unconscious" or "ancient myth". This seems to be the contradiction within Švankmajer's thinking: is our civilisation the logical outcome of a mystical unconscious, or is it a blindness to that unconscious? The mistake here seems to be Švankmajer's confusion in using the romantic distinction between nature and culture: Otesánek as force of nature and also a force of culture. It is significant that he is the *product* of a childless couple: a couple that cannot create but only consume and thus, paradoxically, the fulfilment of their desire to create merely reflects their fundamental inability to do anything but the opposite: consume. There seems to be a certain constipation in thinking here. The film itself has been criticised as being overly long, as though the film is finding it difficult to come to any sort of *expression* (note that the ending is fundamentally ambiguous: what happens in the dark of the cellar?).

Here of course we come back to the "difficulty of communication" - there appears to be overt pessimism in the work of Švankmajer that appears to propose the impossibility of ever moving beyond such contradiction. However, it seems to me that it is the humour of the films themselves (their absurdity and their rather puerile jokes) that allows us to move out of the impasse - in understanding the contradiction to be ridiculous, we are offered the possibility (however small) that it is this understanding which allows us the possibility of a future.

Chapter 6: The Brothers Quay: A Problem of Pronunciation

The films of the Brothers Quay, Timothy and Stephen, systematically resist the possibility of interpretation. This does not mean that their short oeuvre is meaningless, but rather that it takes as its subject the possibility of meaning and of interpretation. If interpretation is understood as the revelation of a hidden, secret or latent meaning beneath the manifest surface of the text, then the Brothers Quay constantly hint at the possibility of such an understanding but never provide enough information to finally make any such interpretive judgement. Andrezej Klimowski identifies a pervasive "state of melancholy and alienation" in their films and that although "we see a surface reality which we long to penetrate […] our efforts become futile" (1980, p. 40).

Of course, it can be argued that no text will ever be able to provide enough information to preclude any misunderstanding of its meaning. This is the problem of the hermeneutic circle, developed by Wilhelm Dilthey, and summarised by Abrams thus:

> To understand the determinate meanings of the parts of any linguistic unit, we must approach them with a prior sense of the meaning of the whole; yet we can know the meaning of the whole only by knowing the meanings of its constituent parts. (Abrams, 1988, p. 86)

This will be a familiar conundrum to us, and it is the way in which the hermeneutic circle has been solved that will be of interest in our discussion of the Quays.

E.D. Hirsch, for instance, sees that the solution lies in knowing the author's "intention" and it is through a procedure of hypothesis testing that the "most probable meaning of a text" can be found (Abrams, 1988, pp. 86-7). Nevertheless, there is an understanding that meaning, or, rather, significance, is "indeterminate and ever changing"

(p. 87), but that this indeterminacy is, in some way, connected to a text's status as "literature" and part of its value. I will argue in this chapter that the Brothers Quay construct their films in such a way that they reverberate within the hermeneutic circle and attempt to thwart traditional, meaningful, interpretations of their work.

Because any question as to what a film might mean always points back to the film itself, rather than to any external sense, it is the films themselves that tautologically become the answers to the questions they pose. The films are then absolutely self-referential objects whose meaning lies both inside and outside of them. In this sense, the films of the Brothers Quay function as fetish objects that imply that there is another meaning outside of themselves, but that meaning is always inaccessible in the film itself. In such a situation the distinction between inside and outside, manifest and latent, becomes radically unstable. However, this shakiness or oscillation (itself a Quay visual motif), never quite tumbles into chaos but always seems on the very verge of doing so. This instability is played out in the narrative structure of the films and in their use of allusion and mise-en-scène.

Writers on the Quays have tended to argue for a certain mystical ineffability in the films that cannot be pinned down by analysis. Suzanne Buchan writes of *Street of Crocodiles* (1986) that there are "fleeting yet remarkable instants of film which transcend lived experience and enter interior realms of the metaphysical" (2004, p. 98). I argue here that this idea of a "metaphysical interior" is one that the Quay films create but do not necessarily contain. In other words, it is the *promise* of an occluded meaning that defines the project of the films rather than the existence of such a meaning. Thus we cannot ever "enter interior realms" but only understand that such realms might

exist. Or at least, the films of the Brothers Quay strongly suggest this to be the case.

In many ways, this conundrum resembles the conceit of Poe's "The Purloined Letter" (1845) in which a letter is hidden by placing it plain sight – literally the last place that any searcher would look. The Quay films pretend that they are hiding a secret but it is the films themselves that are the answer. This answer, however, is always unsatisfactory because a question can never easily be its own answer. This is another way of thinking about the structure of the fetish: it is both question (what does it mean?) and answer (it is this thing).

In this chapter I also wish to explore the structural connection between the fetish and the Freudian uncanny. Both formulations depend finally on the mechanism of disavowal; i.e., both rely on the possibility of two contradictory elements existing simultaneously. In the fetish one both knows and does not know that the mother has a penis, while the experience of the uncanny derives from both knowing and not knowing the truth of a situation (the puppet is both alive and inanimate).

I discuss in detail the Quays' *Nocturna Artificialia* (1979) in terms of the motif of the tram that moves through the film and link it to Kafka's use of traffic in his work (using Zilcosky (1999)). The film is defined by the confusion of interior and exterior and while there is a desire for communication, that desire is always thwarted. My examination of *This Unnameable Little Broom* aka *Epic of Gilgamesh* (1985) concentrates on the way in which the film acts as a lure for critical response. I will also discuss the importance of disavowal in *Street of Crocodiles* (1986) as well as the relevance of Bruno Schulz's short story, "The Book" in understanding the Quay films. I will expand on the impossibility of final meaning in relation to the

institution and *Institute Benjamenta* (1995) and *In Absentia* (2000).

6.1 A Fortunate Formation: A Lack of Orientation

This unsteadiness is echoed in Freud's discussion of the uncanny and in Todorov's later formulation of the fantastic. Freud's 1925 essay is famously, in some ways, a discussion and development of Ernst Jentsch's earlier "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" (1906). Jentsch begins the etymological discussion of the word *unheimlich* by claiming that:

> the German language seems to have produced a rather fortunate formation. Without a doubt, this word appears to express that someone to whom something "uncanny" happens is not quite "at home" or "at ease" in the situation concerned, that the thing is or at least seems to be foreign to him. In brief, the word suggests that a *lack of orientation* is bound up with the impression of the uncanniness of a thing or incident. (Jentsch, 1995, p. 8)

Jentsch sees the uncanny as marked by "sensations of uncertainty" (p. 9) and that a particularly powerful example of such uncertainty is produced when there is "doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate" (p. 11). Jentsch refers to E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" as using the "most reliable artistic" device for producing the uncanny effect, namely, "to leave the reader in uncertainty as to whether he has a human person or rather an automaton before him in the case of a particular character" (p. 13).[83] It is clear that these observations are almost too easily applicable to animated film in general and to the Quays' play of puppetry, illusion and inscrutability in particular. We will discuss these issues in more detail when considering the individual films.

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[83] Both previous citations are quoted by Freud in his essay, pp. 347-348.

Jentsch also argues that there is no absolute definition of what might make something uncanny since "the same impression does not necessarily exert an uncanny effect on everybody" (p. 8). The uncanny, therefore, exists only as a feeling within a particular person and is not the essential property of any particular object or set of circumstances. Jentsch assumes that there does exist universally an "uncanny effect" since no-one does not experience the uncanny, even though many different phenomena may give rise to such a feeling. We are quickly returned to the hermeneutic circle: we know that there is something that gives rise to uncanny feelings, but we only know this because we have a feeling of uncanniness even though this feeling is not occasioned by the same things in all people. How then can we know that what we term "uncanny" within ourselves is the same as that which someone else perceives to be uncanny within him or herself if there is no necessary agreement on what might be the cause of this feeling? This description itself becomes uncanny since there must be a radical uncertainty as to whether the uncanny as such exists.[84]

Freud's formulation of the uncanny, while ostensibly moving beyond Jentsch, does not really provide a solution to the dilemma. While "*Das Unheimliche*" is perhaps best known for its etymological tour-de-force (to which we will return), Freud's major contribution to the understanding of the uncanny (or, rather, to the uncanniness of understanding)

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[84] Nicholas Royle examines this dilemma in more detail in the introductory chapter of *The Uncanny* (pp. 1-38) and particularly stresses the primacy of the uncanny in literature, psychoanalysis and literary criticism. He does however caution: "If psychoanalysis and deconstruction have one thing to teach, it would be about how and why we must not simply give ourselves up or over to the uncanny. There has to be an abiding attachment to the familiar, even if it is one that requires ceaseless suspicion. There has to be a grounding in the rational in order to experience the trembling and break-up. There has to be a sense of home and homeliness within and beyond which to think the unhomely" (p. 25). However, it would seem to me that this nostalgia for the possibility of home can only ever be nostalgia since it is impossible to tell what is homely and what unhomely.

is that it is linked to the "compulsion to repeat" and that "whatever reminds us of this […] is perceived as uncanny" (Freud, 1990, p. 361). It is this repetition compulsion that Freud places at the basis of his understanding of the unconscious[85] and it is the unconscious itself that accounts for the uncanny, and the uncanny:

> is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. (1990, pp. 363-364)

That which is perceived to be uncanny is uncanny because it has been forced into the unconscious and now resonates with that mark. Thus the uncanny is "something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light" (p. 364). But exactly what is it that has been forced into the unconscious and is now, for some reason, making itself felt once again? The only possible answer to this is: consciousness itself. To be conscious at all is to be vaguely aware of the existence of the unconscious (even if unconsciously) and that all of our experience must, by definition, be uncanny. It is now that the compulsion to repeat begins to make more sense, since its origin is the very movement between the conscious and the unconscious and it is this movement, rather than either the conscious or unconscious, which is the state that we call existence.

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[85] In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), to which Freud refers in "The Uncanny", he writes: "Enough is left unexplained to justify the hypothesis of a compulsion to repeat – something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides" (p. 294). He goes on to define the instinctual in the same essay: "*It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things* […], or, to put it another way, [it is] the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life" (pp. 308-309: emphasis in original) and this leads Freud to his infamous formulation that "*the aim of all life is death*" (p. 311: emphasis in original). In this sense, the unconscious *is* repetition compulsion because it is this compulsion that cannot be comprehended by consciousness (since it is the basis of consciousness as such). Nevertheless, it is clear that the uncanny marks the presence of the unconscious and that this, perhaps, is the closest that consciousness can come to apprehending the unconscious.

This movement, which denies priority either to the conscious or to the unconscious, can perhaps be seen more easily if we consider in more detail Freud's discussion of the provenance of the word *unheimlich*. After reproducing a number of dictionary definitions of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, Freud concludes:

> What interests us most in this long extract [from Daniel Sanders's *Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache* (1860)] is to find that among its different shades of meaning the word "*heimlich*" exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, "*unheimlich*". What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*. (Freud, 1990, p. 345)

The argument goes that while the *heimlich* (the homely) is predicated on interiority and safekeeping, it is precisely the *unheimlich* (the uncanny) that defines that which is hidden and "ought to have remained secret" (p. 345). Thus it is the *heimlich* that is the predicate of the *unheimlich*, whereas the *unheimlich* is more commonly understood as a threat coming from without, though it is, in fact, the threat coming from within.[86] The implication here is that those things that are most perceived as safe and welcoming (the home, the family, the toy, the thing) are precisely those things that return, through the mirror of the unconscious, as the *unheimlich*. If we take seriously Freud's identification of the collapse of the *heimlich* into the *unheimlich*, it then becomes more and more difficult to identify exactly where this "mirror of the unconscious"[87] is

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[86] "The *Unheimliche* is, then, is first of all a *re*appearance of material from childhood that has been repressed" (Todd, 1986, p. 520).

[87] "Mirror" here can be understood both in terms of Lacan's formulation of misrecognition: "We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Lacan, 1997, p. 2). It would be possible to give a reading of "The Mirror Stage" precisely in terms of Freud's discussion of the uncanny. It should also be made clear that I am using the term "unconscious" not to describe a mental topography, but rather to designate the point of coming-to-consciousness. It may be useful to think of this in terms of Alice's second entry into the impossible world of imagination. Alice climbs up onto the mantle piece, "though she hardly knew how she had got there", moves through the

placed - on the side of the *heimlich* or the *unheimlich*? - or from which side we are looking. Are we on the side of the *heimlich* looking into the sinister world of the *unheimlich*, or are we, unknowingly, trying to come back home from the position of the *unheimlich*? The answer, of course, is that we are both simultaneously since neither the *heimlich* nor the *unheimlich* can exist without the other (in a classic binary opposition). In addition, it is not possible to determine whether something is *heimlich* or *unheimlich* since the definitions of both terms collapse into each other.[88] Thus it is not that, as Royle claims, that the uncanny has precedence, or that, conversely, the *heimlich* governs our world, but rather that there is a constant and unknowable movement between these two states (although the geographical metaphor here does not quite capture the sense I am groping at) which is that state of the uncanny beyond the distinction *heimlich/unheimlich*. It is in the work of the Brothers Quay that the radical uncertainty between the familiar and the unfamiliar is forcefully put into play.

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looking-glass and notices that "what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was as different as possible" (Carroll, 1998, p. 127). There is a double-movement of fiction here: from the imagined Alice to the imagined Alice-Through-The-Looking-Glass and it is not clear which of these has priority in the world of the novel, just as it is unclear whether this novel is a reflection of Carroll/Dodgson and if so, whether this reflection tells us anything other than the blank fact of reflection: "the glass *was* beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist" (p. 127).

[88] In her complex consideration of the role of fiction in Freud's "The Uncanny", Hélène Cixous comments on this collapse of categories in the figure of the Ghost: "It is the *between* that is tainted with strangeness. Everything remains to be said on the subject of the Ghost and the ambiguity of the Return, for what renders it intolerable is not so much that it is an announcement of death nor even the proof that death exists, since this Ghost announces and proves nothing more than his return. What is intolerable is that the Ghost erases the limit which exists between two states, neither alive nor dead; passing through, the dead man returns in the manner of the Repressed. It is his coming back which makes the ghost what he is, just as it is the return of the Repressed that inscribes the repression." (Cixous, 1976, p. 543)

6.2 The Uncanny, the Fetish and Disavowal

In her consideration of the way in which Freud deals with the figure of woman in "The Uncanny", Jane Marie Todd explores the centrality of women to his discussion and particularly comments on the example that "neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs" (Freud, 1990, p. 368; Todd, 1986, p. 520) and that this "furnishes a beautiful confirmation of our theory of the uncanny…. This *unheimlich* place is the entrance to the former *Heim* (home) of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning….In this case too, then, the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, familiar; the prefix "un" is the token of repression" (Freud, 1990, p. 368; Todd, 1986, pp. 520-521: ellipses Todd's). Todd goes on to point out that Freud himself moved away from this interpretation in his 1927 essay on fetishism because he positions the uncanny in relation to castration anxiety rather than to some sense of atavism. She quotes Freud:

> An investigation of fetishism is strongly recommended to anyone who still doubts the existence of the castration complex or who can still believe that fright at the sight of the female genitals has some other ground: for instance, that it is derived from a supposed recollection of the trauma of birth. (Freud, 1991b, p. 355; Todd, 1986, p. 524)

In Freud's reading of Hoffman's "The Sandman" he stresses the importance of the gouging out of eyes as the primary source of the uncanny since this is read as a metaphor for castration. Freud directly contradicts Jentsch's reading of the story in which he focuses on the uncertainty of whether Olympia is living or a doll (Todd, 1986, p. 523). The reason that Freud puts castration at the centre of the uncanny is that it is through the threat of castration that repression into the unconscious occurs (or, even, that the unconscious is brought into existence). In "Fetishism" the sight of the female genitals causes the child to fear his

(or her) own castration and this fear is then disavowed and transferred to the fetish object. Todd writes that the female genitals "are *unheimlich* for precisely this reason: they seem to confirm what the male has wished to deny – the reality of castration" (Todd, 1986, p. 524). This would appear to imply that it is the genitals themselves that are the fetish object par excellence and it is not, I think, necessary to imagine that the fetish moves elsewhere. The important point, though, is that it is the threat of castration (disavowed through the fetish structure) that defines both the uncanny and the fetish. It may be said then that every fetish is uncanny. Disavowal allows the existence of two contradictory propositions to exist simultaneously and that the doubling of the *heimlich* into the *unheimlich* precisely echoes this fetishistic structure.

6.3 Todorov Intervenes

> Our aim is to create a state of suspension where the effect, if it works, is not unlike dreaming, albeit dreaming uneasily. (Quay Brothers, interviewed in Petit, 1986, p. 164)

The troubled, double-structure of the *unheimlich* (and of the fetish) is one that can be usefully understood through a consideration of Tzvetan Todorov's explication of the fantastic.[89] Todorov places the fantastic as genre in the space of a "certain hesitation", where it is not possible to decide whether an event can be explained by natural, but not immediately apparent, rules or whether that event is the result of some sort of supernatural intervention. Todorov is careful to make clear that the rules by which the natural or supernatural are judged must come from within the story world itself. Thus he says that the fantastic must fulfil three conditions:

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[89] For an overview of the way in which the fantastic has been discussed in film theory, see James Donald's Introduction to the first section of his *Fantasy and the Cinema* (1989, pp. 10-21). Of particular interest is the discussion of Carl-Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1931) and the way in which Todorov's formulation of the fantastic has been applied to this film by Mark Nash (1976) and David Bordwell (1981).

> First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character [...]. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations.[90] (Todorov, 1975, p.33)

Thus it is a story world's "reality" that must be used to judge whether or not that story is in the genre of the fantastic. It should also be noted that Todorov is concerned specifically with *genre* and not merely with moments within a text and so demands that the story as a whole be considered before a judgement is made as to whether it is fantastic or not. Unfortunately, though, the fantastic "leads a life full of dangers, and may evaporate at any moment" (1975, p. 41). Since the fantastic is so evanescent, Todorov writes that it "seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny, rather than to be an autonomous genre" (1975, p. 41). The fantastic, then, although fairly clearly defined as a "certain hesitation", is not seen to exist as such. He therefore writes that:

> At the story's end, the reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic. If he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the

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[90] This third condition is explained earlier: "There exist narratives which contain supernatural elements without the reader's ever questioning their nature, for he realizes that he is not to take them literally. If animals speak in a fable, doubt does not trouble the reader's mind: he knows that the words of the text are to be taken in another sense, which we call *allegorical*. The converse situation applies to *poetry*. The poetic text might often be judged fantastic, provided we required poetry to be representative. But the question does not come up. If it is said, for instance, that the "poetic I" soars into space, this is no more than a verbal sequence, to be taken as such, without there being any attempt to go beyond the words to images" (Todorov, 1975, p. 32).

> phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvelous. (Todorov, 1975, p. 41)

The fantastic is therefore not as easily available as might at first appear. He goes on to divide this generic continuum into four possible conditions, none of which is purely fantastic. He places two "sub-genres" between the uncanny and the marvelous which "include works that sustain hesitation characteristic of the true fantastic for a long period, but that ultimately end in the marvelous or the uncanny" and presents the following visually representation:

> *uncanny* / *fantastic-uncanny* / *fantastic-marvelous* / *marvelous* (Todorov, 1975, p. 44)

He then says that the fantastic "in its pure state is represented here by the median line separating the fantastic-uncanny from the fantastic-marvelous" and concludes that this "line corresponds perfectly to the nature of the fantastic, a frontier between two adjacent realms" (Todorov, 1975, p. 44). The fantastic becomes a liminal state-without-area that only ever exists fleetingly in the movement from one "real" genre to another. Necessarily, however, it is the fantastic-as-border that allows the initial distinction between the uncanny and the marvelous in the first place. It should be clear now that Todorov's fantastic is equivalent to Jentsch's definition of the uncanny as uncertainty. It also, however, allows us to think of Freud's reading of the uncanny as the (intimation of the) return of the repressed in terms of its structuring, rather than structured, nature. For Freud, the uncanny comes from the unconscious, but it is also the condition, as has been argued above, for the existence of the unconscious as such. We might re-trace Todorov's diagram thus:

> *conscious* / *uncanny-conscious* / *uncanny-unconscious* / *unconscious*

where the central dividing line is the space of the "pure" uncanny. We can also understand that Todorov resists being more definite about the fantastic as a genre because he wants to retain the importance of hesitation.

We will go on to see that the films of the Brothers Quay are exceptional (although, it must be said, that all films or fictions could be argued to be similarly exceptional) in that they occupy the dividing line of the fantastic/uncanny without allowing the "reader" the possibility of making up his or her mind "at the story's end" whether the "solution" is uncanny or marvelous, conscious or unconscious.

6.4 Trembling and Pronunciation

Biographical information on Timothy and Stephen Quay understandably tends to stress their movement from middle-class America to London and the way in which their films seem to be particularly interested in a sense of a lost or forgotten European sensibility which is in some way more dense than the prosaic reality of the New World (this tension is played out in their oeuvre through their advertising work – much of it made exclusively for the American market – and their "real" films – made for an international art house audience). Their own autobiography plays with the perceived mundanity and lack of romance associated with their non-European origins (with a nod to Krafft-Ebing's case study style):

> What if we said we [were] born of a heavily tainted family, neurasthenic, micro-encephalic, each with one atrophied testicle, a sly liking for geese, chickens, etc., pigtails in pillowcases, suffer from dry tongues, overly predisposed towards music and abandoned organ lofts, blah, blah, blah. No, we grew up sweating with obedience. Our Father was a 2nd class machinist for Philadelphia Electric, our mother your impeccable housewife (who was a figure skater before marriage). On our father's side there were two grandfathers: one a tailor from Berlin who had a shop in South Philly and the other, who was apparently a cabinet maker and we were told that the 5th floor of

> Lit Brothers [department store] in Philly has cabinets by the Quays. (Now we lived in Philly for some five years and never made that tiny little expedition to confirm it.) Our Mother's father was excellent at carpentry and was also a chauffeur when Philly only had 5 automobiles to its name. SO! In terms of puppetry it's surprisingly all there – carpentry, mechanisms and tailoring and figure skating to music to score any of our aberrant tracking shots. Big Deal, will this help you dear fellow? (Letter to J.D. McClatchy, quoted in Tomlinson, 2001, p. 6; Buchan, p. 5)

It is clear from their light tone that the Quays play easily with the notion that their biography may in some way illuminate the meaning of their work. They helpfully provide a self-analysis of the way in which this biography may be read in terms of their films and conclude that the banality of such observations are particularly useless and that they "mock a kind of simplistic pop-psychological cause-and-effect analysis" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 5). Their self-revelation knowingly revels in the Barthesian universe where "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes, 1990, p. 148).[91]

The barely perceptible but constantly repeating change between two states is a recurring motif throughout the Quays' films. This flickering change is detectable in their own family name which has at least three possible pronunciations in English: key, k-why, k-way. The brothers themselves give conflicting advice on proper pronunciation

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[91] Their biography is perhaps best summarised by Wadley: "b. 1947 Norristown, Philadelphia; studied illustration at Philadelphia College of Art, 1965-69 and at the Royal College of Art, London, 1969-72; Philadelphia 1972-78; award from National Endowment for the Arts, for suite of drawings; returned to London 1978; formed Koninck production company with Keith Griffiths, 1980; acquired current studio, London Bridge, 1989" (Wadley, 1997, p. 143). Variations of this story are repeated throughout the small commentary on the Quays (Tomlinson, 2001, pp. 6-18; Buchan, 1998, pp. 5-7; Romney, 1990, p. 16). For more personal memories of Philadelphia, see Petit (1986, p. 164). In terms of broader issues of auteurism as it has been discussed within film studies, see Wells (2002, pp. 72-76) for a useful overview of the impact this may have on animation, but note that Wells is more interested in "American feature length animation" and the way in which the figure of the auteur is elided from discussions of these films. This discussion is not relevant here.

and for a short while even chose to spell the name with a slightly Slavic inflection, Quaij.[92] Even if the Quays were to proclaim a "proper" pronunciation the echo of other possibilities would reverberate nevertheless. It is this oscillation between one state and another, with neither state being of importance in itself, gaining significance only in its repeated negation, that produces another indeterminable condition that is perhaps best understood as the constant tone of a sine wave (and, as we shall see, the importance of sound in the Quay's films is enormous, if not primary: "Most of our animation started by having the music first" (Wadley, 1997, p. 135)). The visual rings with the aura of the aural so that it is only in the undecideable synaesthesia of the experience that a non-meaning meaning emerges. There is no latent (true) content - only the manifestly obscure surface itself. We will see that the films' concern with objects and their surfaces, often covered in dust or grime, echoes with a concern for the real (in Lacan and Žižek's sense of the "*objet petit a*" as "the original lost object" (Žižek, 1989, p. 158)).

We must, however, take care not to follow the Quays too far down a certain romantic and mystically obscurantist pathway. For instance, the following remarks on the "language of things" can be seen to make claims for a certain sublime experience of the exotic other, which is merely that other's banal reality:

> But if we talk of language, we needn't talk objectively of just English, or Polish, or Portuguese: but rather more so of the language of things. Things of the senses which elude or resist classification, numbering, or cataloguing. A friend of ours once heard the sound of a voice counting out change in Polish and said it sounded like "rustling taffeta". This is a profoundly beautiful footnote to any language, to the innately mysterious texture of that language, and so you approach its hem with more trembling than you dared imagine. (Quays interviewed in Wadley, 1997, p. 136)

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[92] Roger Cardinal, private conversation.

It is clear that in this passage the Quays are drawn to the very "foreign-ness" of such material and while, on the one hand, this can be understood as a reinvigorating "seeing-afresh", a Shklovskian *ostranenie* of the everyday; on the other, one must be careful not take too seriously the "innate" nature of such strangeness at the risk of romanticising the other as that which one is not (as a fantasy of escape).[93] In the realm of the real such strangeness, surely, inheres in the language of the Quays as much as it does in the language of Polish accountancy. This tension between a rather superficial celebration of the brute muteness of the other as an antidote to the unglamorous transparency of the self and the patronising consignment of the other to the realm of the "innately mysterious", is one that should be at the centre of any consideration of the Quays' work (and, of course, one should take care not to confuse reports from the Quays themselves with a reading of the work itself – more on this tendency in Quay criticism below).

6.5 The Future of an Allusion

> **Allude**, *v.* 1535 [- L. *alludere* play or dally with, touch lightly upon, f. *ad* AL- + *ludere* engage in play.] **1.** To mock –1577; to play upon words, to refer by play of words –1607; to refer by play of fancy (*trans.* And *intr.*) –1665. **2.** *intr.* To have or make an indirect or passing reference to (not = *refer*) 1533.

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[93] It may be possible to understand this in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a "line of escape" which they discuss in some detail throughout *Kafka* (1986, pp. 34-36). However, this phrase, as well as "absolute deterritorialization" (p. 35), is somewhat enigmatic and, despite Deleuze and Guattari's multiple protestations against this, *metaphoric*. Nevertheless, it is very valuable that they stress the centrality of politics and joy to "minor literature" (n. 16, pp. 95-96) and it is particularly in the notion of "joy", which I think can be understood in the sense of not taking oneself too seriously, that the Quays' celebration of the exotic might be understood. Tomlinson comments: "At first glance, most Quay films may not seem funny, at least not the kind of funny most people are prepared for in animation. But beneath the surface, a strange dark humor is at work. Their films are both funny 'ha-ha' and funny 'peculiar'. A clue to their humor is that they discussed Buster Keaton and the *neutrality* of his humor with the lead actor in their live-action film *Institute Benjamenta*" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 17)

> **3.** *trans.* To refer a thing *to*, as a thing to its author –1634. **4.** To hint, suggest –1677.
>
> **Allusion.** 1548. [-Fr. *Allusion* or late L. *allusio*, f. *allus-*, pa. ppl. stem of *alludere* ALLUDE *v.*] **1.** Illusion –1618. **2.** A word-play –1731. **3.** A symbolical reference –1781. **4.** A covert or implied reference 1612. (OED)

Quay films are perhaps more defined by their allusiveness than by any other single feature. Much of the criticism on the films is concerned with excavating the obscure references (often "indirect and passing") to a staggering variety of half-forgotten figures. At times these allusions are fairly explicit, as when a particular film is clearly labeled as the adaptation of a certain author's work: *The Street of Crocodiles* (1986) is based on various writings of Bruno Schulz, *Institute Benjamenta* (1995) on those of Robert Walser, Franz Kafka is the source for *Ein Brudermoord*; or when their films are poetic documentaries on people such as Jan Švankmajer, Igor Stravinsky, Leoš Janáček or the asylum internee, Emma Hauck (*In Absentia* (2000); *Beyond Reason*, 1996, pp. 93-95). There are also less explicit references to the London Underground, the art brut of Heinrich Anton Muller, surrealist film, 19th century sexual pathology, Toyen and Lewis Carroll. The question to be asked here is what the role of the critic is in considering these allusive texts. Is it to explain carefully the provenance of every reference made in every film? Or is it to explain what might be interesting about any such allusion within the broader context of an interpretation of the film? Of course, we find ourselves right back in the hermeneutic circle: either an allusion is leading us somewhere outside of the text itself, or the allusion is to a meaning that we must understand first before we can understand the relevance of that allusion.

Buchan observes that without the "contextual knowledge of what informs the Quays' films the viewer is usually puzzled or baffled" and that there is "an additional level of

pleasure available to spectators who can engage imaginatively with the films' aesthetic and stylistic complexities" (2004, p. 104). Buchan implies that "pleasure" results from understanding the allusions but I would argue that such understanding must always be illusory since it can never be finally contextualised. Thus the pleasure in complex allusion is one tinged with anxiety.

It is also possible to understand the allusiveness of the films as a form of museum conservation. The Quays' films incorporate obscure and nearly forgotten images or figures as a fragile safeguard against the loss of the easily misplaced. They act as a cultural memory (and we will see the importance of this role when we consider Bruno Schulz in more detail).

However, it seems that the process of interpreting allusions must involve a certain interpretation of the thing alluded to which must then be read back into the source of the allusion in order to allow a hermeneutic resonance to emerge. In this sense, then, I am taking the image of trembling and reading it back into the interpretation of the films themselves: just as the films represent trembling so they themselves tremble on the edge of meaning. This is merely a rather complicated way of saying the films ask to be read metaphorically but ultimately are themselves metaphors for the process of interpretation. They contain objects (and subjects) that are presented as fetishes, laden within imminent meaning, but are themselves just such fetishes. The loop here is a trap.

6.6 *Nocturna Artificialia*: Pantographs of Desire

After their studies at the Royal College of Art in London, the Quays returned to Philadelphia, "waiting on tables and washing dishes" (there is a delight, evident in their letter to McClatchy, in juxtaposing mundane reality with

the rarefied nature of their films) until they were able to return to Europe courtesy of a National Endowment for the Arts grant and design book covers in the Netherlands. The British Film Institute accepted a film proposal from them and in 1979 they move to London to make *Nocturna Artificialia* (Buchan, 1998, p. 6). The film contains a number of motifs and themes that will reappear throughout their work:

> puppets enmeshed in disorienting point-of-view structures; hermetic interiors; elaborate graphics; complex orchestrations of light and shadow; intertextuality; invocations of Eastern European traditions; declarations of homage, and sound tracks that both counterpoint and sustain the imagery. (Buchan, 1998, p. 6)

This reflects a tendency in Quay criticism to describe rather than to interpret the films in any coherent way. Buchan, for instance, provides a succinct summary of the film but does not provide any way of reading the film other than merely to admire the technical complexity and enigmatic academicism of the work.[94] If, however, we understand that it is the process of signification itself that is the central theme of the Quays' films it is possible to read *Nocturna Artificialia* through its central motif of transport, most obviously represented by the enigmatic comings and goings of the tram into and out of the film. It is possible that the Quays' use of the image of the tram as image of urban and existential alienation is quite consciously an allusion to Kafka – and with this we are in similar territory to those critics who analyse the psychoanalytic structures of films made with full knowledge

[94] "As in the majority of the films, the narrative of *Nocturna Artificialia* is unspectacular, even nonexistent: a solitary figure gazes out of his window, enters the nocturnal street, is transfixed by a passing tram, and suddenly, back in his room, falls from his chair and wakes up. The film is structured in eight sections identified by intertitles (in English, Polish, French, and German). In various states of epiphany and hallucination, the figure's somnambular wanderings are constructed by the formal treatment of images (camera angles, spatial organization, focus shifts, and dissolves), and by the music and sound track which synthesize the characteristically disturbing tension" (Buchan, 1998, p. 6).

of the very psychoanalytic literature that is being used to explicate the work in question. I will compare the film to John Zilcosky's analysis of the figure of traffic in Kafka's *Briefe an Milena*.

Zilcosky charts with great care the way in which Kafka discusses technologies of communication ("Verkehr" – a word that can mean both "traffic" and "intercourse" in German (Zilcosky, 1999, p. 367)) as these relate both to letter-writing and to physical travel itself. He explains that:

> According to Kafka, the world was divided technologically into two groups: the technologies of human presence (train, automobile, aeroplane, etc.) and the technologies of absence (postal system, telegraph, wireless, etc.). (Zilcosky, 1999, p. 366)

Zilcosky goes on to explain the way in which Kafka plays with the lover's angst of being absent from the loved one through a complex discourse surrounding the exchange of stamps, which Zilcosky claims "are, for Kafka, a fetish object valued even more than Milena's 'beautiful' telegrams, since Milena has actually touched the stamps" (Zilcosky, 1999, p. 373). Kafka is thus engaged with the possibility of communication (Verkehr) as such, rather than with a love affair (although it may be difficult to distinguish between the two since each tends to be used as a metaphor for the other). If we consider Kafka's rumination on the possibility of "Verkehr" we will be able to understand more clearly the ways in which the Quay Brothers play with this figure in *Nocturna Artificialia*. Kafka writes to Milena:

> [Letter-writing] is, in fact, an intercourse with ghosts ["ist ja ein Verkehr mit Gespenstern"]. How on earth did anyone get the idea that people can communicate with one another by letter? Of a distant person one can think, and of a person who is near one can catch hold – all else goes beyond human strength. Writing letters, however, means to denude oneself before the ghosts, something for which they greedily wait. Written kisses don't reach their destination,

> rather they are drunk on the way by the ghosts. (Kafka, 1999, p. 183; Zilcosky, 1999, p. 380)

There appears to be something disingenuous in this pronouncement since Kafka's proposed possibilities of real communication (thinking of a distant person or holding one nearby) are in fact infected by the same ghosts that Kafka sees in operation in the business of letter-writing. Neither real nor written kisses can reach their destination because one is always in the process of communication and never in the state of having communicated; there cannot be an absolute exchange of pure meaning (a problematic implied in the very necessity of "Verkehr" in the first place). The ghosts that leach meaning from letters as they travel to their destination are not aberrations that might be expunged through some technological change in message delivery, but are present in every communication (whether it be one of human presence or absence, in Zilcosky's terms). Kafka continues in his letter:

> Humanity senses this [action of the ghosts] and fights against it and in order to eliminate as far as possible the ghostly element between people and to create a natural communication, the peace of souls, it has invented the railway, the motor car, the aeroplane. (Kafka, 1999. p. 183)

Here Kafka posits the possibility of unmediated communication that is represented by two people being within touching (kissing) distance of each other and that it is through the transportation of human bodies that technology seeks to eliminate the "ghostly element". It is however clear that Kafka actively resists meeting Milena and his letters, as Zilcosky charts, contain a litany of evasions and anxieties concerning his possible physical contact with Milena.[95] While the train system can bring

[95] Zilcosky also argues that "trains had already pervaded the collective *fin de siècle* unconscious as a symbol of sexuality" (1999, p. 366) and goes on to discuss the way in which psychoanalysis theorised this form of transportation. For instance, in the *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud writes: "It is a puzzling fact that boys take such an extraordinarily intense interest in things connected with railways, and, at the age at

bodies together, the letter system (which includes "the telegraph, the telephone, the radiograph" (Kafka, 1999, p. 183)) can only attempt to do so, but the crucial point is that both systems are fundamentally incapable of delivering a true message since the necessity of delivery as such always already interferes with the possibility of a true arrival. Here, I think, we are reminded once again of the structure of the *unheimlich*: whilst home (arrival) is desperately longed for, it is itself the condition of non-arrival. Thus the "Verkehr" of either train or letter, of presence or absence, is never successful in arriving home, the kiss never hits its mark and the stamp remains the sign of an absent presence - just as the loved one herself would be just such an absent presence even were she to be physically present.

If, as Zilcosky asserts, "the letters function as fetishistic substitutes for Milena's body" (1999, n. 14, p. 372) then the letters both are and are not Milena's body, just as Milena's body is and is not Milena's body. Any contact, whether in person or in writing, is already ghostly, not quite itself, since the object is never exactly itself. The home is always already unhomely. It is this problematic of mediated "traffic" that the Quay Brothers explore in *Nocturna Artificialia*.

The film concentrates on a lone puppet figure as it intently considers the passing of various electric trams (or the multiple passings of the same tram) (see Buchan, 1998, p. 6). The film's apparently enigmatic surface quite clearly engages with the image of traffic as both communication and intercourse. Subtitled "Those Who Desire Without End",[96] *Nocturna Artificialia* begins with the

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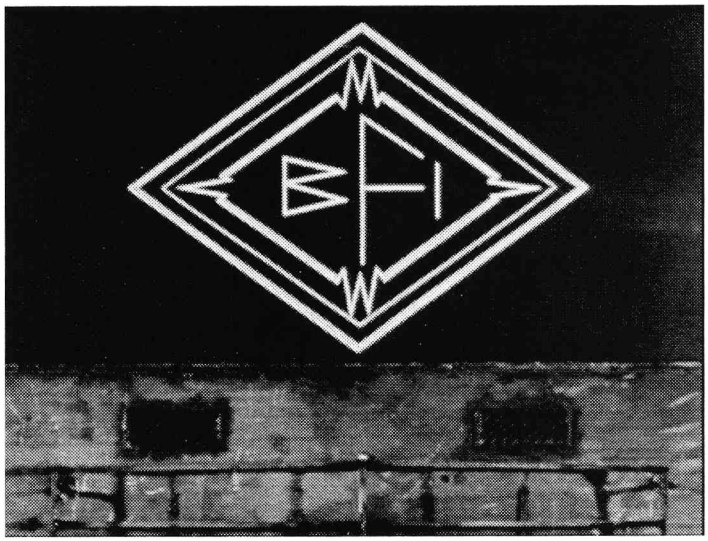
which the production of phantasies is most active (shortly before puberty), use those things as the nucleus of a symbolism that is peculiarly sexual" (Freud, 1991b, p. 121).

[96] This endless desire is, of course, the desire for communication. The film is rather confusingly dedicated to "Gueuze et Lambic a la Mort Subite, Bruxelles" with an address given as "Rue de l'Arbre-Bénit No. 71 Gewijde-Boom Straat".

acronym of the British Film Institute (BFI) within a stylised frame which resembles an electric circuit diagram drawn with an art deco sensibility.



Already we are confronted with a sense of outdated modernity, which is further complicated by the puzzling image at the bottom of the frame. This appears to be an overhead shot of a pavement with two drainage grills on either side and what is probably an electric tram's pantograph: the diamond-shaped contacts on the top of the tram used to power the vehicle via overhead electric lines.

The OED gives the original meaning of this word as "an instrument for the mechanical copying of a plan, etc., on the same or an enlarged scale" and it becomes clear that their interest in this particular object incorporates their concern with perspective and representational reproduction (most literally in *De Artificiali Perspectiva — Anamorphosis* (1990), but throughout their oeuvre). The pantograph is the figure of representation itself and

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Gueuze Lambic is a particular brand of Belgian beer brewed by Mort Subite and has obvious connotations of inebriation and death although its relevance to the film as such is obscure (other than in its very obscurity). The address may well refer to the Quays' own experience of Belgium (although it may also be significant that a film theatre called the Styx is situated at No. 72 Giwijde-Boom). Would an authorial dictant on this allusion be of any help? The auteur loop and the difficulty of understanding a private symbol as anything other than a symbol of privacy coincide here.

stands for the necessary distance (*différance*) between subject and object, presence and absence. It is not so much a fetish, as the fetish structure: the possibility of the relationship between the present and the absent.

Nocturna Artificialia is defined by two formal features: the confusion between inside and outside (imagination and reality) and the repeated use of tracking and what might be termed pseudo-tracking shots. The first plays itself out on a thematic level (the film can be understood as the puppet's dream or imagined desire) and we can never be sure whether the images we are seeing are the puppet's thoughts or actual events. Of course, the fact that the film is animated already makes the distinction between the actual and the imagined ambiguous. The puppet moves easily between being inside its room and being inside the tram it is watching from that room. During Section VIII,[97] the puppet is apparently run over by the tram but collapses inside its room. At this moment the puppet's eyes, which have throughout the film been painted a blank white, are painted with crude pupils as if it were now awake.

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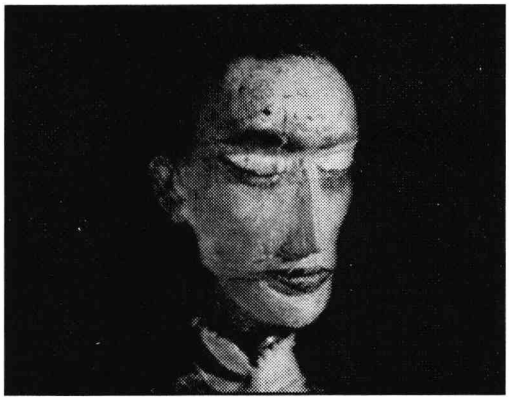
[97] The film is divided into eight sections, each preceded by a mock travel information intertitle in four languages. They read as follows:

I. The sounds, so prolonged now — that pause mechanically to line the wooden streets below
II. Beneath electric arc lamps — where a tram pylon leaves a place free on the right, I took up my position in its shadow
III. Above all at night, beneath a wire, one foot wedged between the steel points, the air is stung furiously
IV. I shift my head from side to side and, for the time, repeat my provocations at repeated intervals
V. Where pantographs too tight for ceilings have halted, this tram passes beneath the cathedral
VI. Through gradually tightening avenues, I felt the ecstasy of something nameless
VII. Along heavy folds, the same as theatres, as confessionals, secrets emerged that belonged only to me
VIII. Beneath vertebrae of metal, so prolonged now — this cold glove over my spine



As it lies on the floor of its room, there is a close up of its hand stroking the floor, which we now notice, is made of cobbled stones and has a tram-track running through it. It is now impossible to tell whether the room is inside or outside itself. A similar play on space occurs in section V where the tram moves spectrally through a cathedral, or rather, the staged presence of a cathedral. This ambiguity is played out in the title *Nocturna Artificialia* itself. If the night we see is artificial then where is the real night? The film can only exist, in reality, as an illusion and thus it is impossible to ask whether the night is true or false, but only whether it exists or not. The answer, of course, is that it both does and does not exist simultaneously, just as the puppet experiences inside and outside as non-exclusive spaces. In this way and through the process of disavowal the film occupies the position of the fetish.

The second defining element of *Nocturna Artifialia*, the tracking shot, occurs throughout the film and often mimics the eyeline of a passenger on a moving tram. While it is clear that the camera itself often tracks left or right over the stage set, there are often moments of "pseudo-tracking" when it appears that the camera is still and an object is animated past its lens to give the impression of tracking. There are also complex combinations of these two techniques that give the unsettling impression of being in a tram moving in the opposite direction to the one travelling past one's window. A repeated motif all through

the film are the station signs that scroll past the viewer. The signs move very quickly so that it is impossible to read what is printed on them, but even when slowed down the letters are revealed to be so deteriorated that they continue to be illegible.[98] This relentless movement of the tram is one that the puppet seems particularly to enjoy since in the first section, when the puppet is first mesmerised by the passing tram, it quickly imagines itself as the tram, with its feet lightly moving over the track. Thus the movement of the tram and the confusion of space and even identity (the puppet dreams or imagines itself to be the tram) are linked to the desire to move from inside to outside, from internal ennui to external affirmation. But just as the pupils painted onto the puppet's eyes are a crude simulacrum of vision, so this communication only exists in the impossibility of its achievement.

To return to the image of the pantograph, it is important to note that the tram is powered by another energy that it connects to via the pantograph. While the film seldom shows the pantograph in touch with an electric line, thus increasing the ghostly ambience of its travel, the puppet senses this other power, which we can understand to be the power of the animated film itself, based as it is on electricity and movement. This energy is represented by taut wires (an image that recurs throughout the Quays' films, especially *The Street of Crocodiles*) that the puppet glimpses from inside its apartment.

[98] The only sign that can be read clearly is seen during the cathedral sequence (section V). The pencil drawn cathedral forms the backdrop while a veiled object, perhaps an object, is suspended above a sign reading "lacrimosa".

This sign of an occult power that in some way energises the entire machinery of the film is central both to the Quays' films and to the fetish. What that power might be is never revealed.

6.7 *The Cabinet of Jan Švankmajer – Prague's Alchemist of Film*

This film is part of a documentary made for Channel 4 in June 1984 about Jan Švankmajer. Its ten sections were originally spread throughout a more conventional appraisal of Švankmajer's work. *The Cabinet of Jan Švankmajer*, however, is most commonly available without the rest of the documentary and is here considered in that format (see Petley, 1986, p. 188). Švankmajer's interest in surrealism, in the animated, outmoded object and in self-reflexive narratives makes him an obvious reference point for the Quays. His middle-European exoticism, constantly alluded to throughout the film, no doubt also makes Švankmajer an object of interest. The Quays portray Švankmajer as Arcimboldo's composite librarian (1566) and he is cast in the role of an alchemical master who teaches a naïve child the secrets of animation and the esoteric power of objects. With Arcimboldo's vegetal portrait of Rudolf II as backdrop, the librarian empties the child's head of useless

knowledge before proceeding to teach it the occult arts. At the end of the film, the child's new knowledge is represented by a small book which echoes the librarian's own head-piece.

The Cabinet of Jan Švankmajer presents eight lessons, with a prelude and a finale. The first lesson, "Pins for Loose Geographies", precisely pinpoints Švankmajer's position on two maps. The first shows Europe with Prague and Paris the only two visible cities, proclaiming the connection between the Czech Surrealist Group and the more famous Paris group. On the second map, an animated quill moves to the exact point where Švankmajer still lives and which is also currently the site of the Gambra Surrealist Gallery (Černínská 5, Prague 1, 118 00). In lesson two, "Atelier of Jan Švankmajer: XVIth & Xxth Centuries Simultaneously (An Unexpected Visitor)", we are introduced to the librarian puppet in his studio with neon advertising signs visible through the windows (all of twentieth century Czech products or companies: Tuzex, Staropramen, Supraphon) and the ubiquitous tram passing by. He shows the newcomer a series of optical illusions involving the paintings of Arcimboldo. The puppet learns to take nothing for granted and that everything might have a double meaning.

In lessons three and four, "Pursuit of the Object" and "The 'Wunderkammer'", the librarian introduces the child to two rooms, both panelled from floor to ceiling with cabinets entitled "Elementa". In the first room, these are opened to reveal various dried plants, animal bones and books[99] as the librarian searches for something specific in his vast taxonomic collection. Various composite skeleton animals stored in the second room fascinate the child until, in lesson five ("The Child's Divining of the Object"), the child is suddenly driven to lead the librarian to open a Chinese box series of drawers. At the end of this search, the librarian opens a final drawer that contains a number of pebbles which he manipulates gingerly with his compass hand. It is during this sequence that the play between inside and outside, which we saw in *Nocturna Artificialia*, is explored once again.

When the child first indicates to the librarian which drawer it wants opened, the librarian pulls out an entire vertical bank of drawers and this has further drawers set in its side. As the librarian drags the bank of drawers, our view cuts to what we presume to be an outside shot of the house in which the Wunderkammer is located. The phrase "*Nový Svét*", the New World in Czech, is inked in the Quays' distinctive calligraphy on the side of the house and we see that the drawers that the librarian is extracting telescope directly from the walls of the house so that they have no interior space other than the world outside. The next shot shows the quill that points to Švankmajer's house on the map of Prague being drawn into the map at the same speed at which the librarian heaves the drawers into the house. The

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[99] The books in the drawer appear also at the beginning of the film in an indecipherable blur and their titles list the names of the people who have been major influences on Švankmajer: [Karel] Teige, [Vratislav] Effenberger, Poe, Kafka, Lautréamont, [Viteslav] Nezval, Rudolf II, Lewis Carroll, Breton and Arcimboldo. The only difference between these two occurrences of a very similar image is that in the drawer the Kafka book is held shut by a metal screw clamp. It is almost as if Kafka threatens to engulf both Švankmajer and the Quays if he is allowed free reign in their universes, which are so clearly indebted to him.

librarian and child then open a further series of drawers-within-drawers until they come to the stones. The stones seem to have no further significance. This complicated search finds a blank object that offers no insight other than the fact of its own existence. The object is drawn in from the outside and is gently appreciated merely for the fact of its existence but appears to offer no solution to the quest, other than that it is now at an end. The distinction between inside and outside here is predicated on the existence of this brute reality which appears not to exist in the outside as we perceive it, but rather only in the search for that object. This, of course, would appear to be another example of the *petit objet a* (or, indeed, the McGuffin – that thing which motivates the characters in a narrative but which is merely the pretext for the existence – and enjoyment by others – of that narrative (Žižek, 1990, p. 163)). The fetish object, like the world, both exists and does not exist, in the sense that it has no interior meaning, merely a structural one.

In lesson six, "The Migration of Forms", the child looks into one of the drawers and sees an optical illusion: a version of the cabinet room skewed in perspective, in which origami birds fly from one drawer to another. Just as paper can transform into birds that migrate from one place to another, so the world in which the child finds itself contains other versions which may themselves contain the world of the child. Migration from reality to illusion would appear to be simplified by the fact that the difference between the two states is merely spatial rather than ontological.

With reference to Švankmajer's "researches" into the role of touch, lesson seven, subtitled "a tactile experiment", presents the child and the librarian in a "Metaphysical Playroom", wallpapered with a distinctive lined paper which will reappear in *Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies* (1987). The librarian puts his hands into a covered box while the

child peers inside to see the object that the librarian is examining only by touch. The object under scrutiny is a dead tarantula. In a form of free association, the librarian calls out, in stylised cartoon captions, "Fox Fur" and "Fir Tree". These issues of haptic knowledge are discussed at length by Švankmajer in his book *Hmat a Imaginace* (*Touch and Imagination*) (1994), which is both a parody of scientific research and a serious claim for touch as the forgotten sense in art aesthetics. However, the idea that touch is in some way a more primary sense than any of the others points towards a certain romanticism in Švankmajer which is perhaps absent in the Quays.

In the final and eighth lesson, punningly headed "Tarantella" (a traditional dance), the child "Receives a Lesson in 1/24th of a Second". Here the librarian produces a camera and, using a wooden ball, shows the child how to make an animated film. The subtitle of this lesson encapsulates the double logic of the film as a whole: just as the film *is* the lesson that the child learns, so that lesson is *about* the film. The film's finale, "For a New Dawn", sees the child leave with its head full of new ideas to catch the tram back to reality.

6.8 *Little Songs of the Chief Officer of Hunar Louse, or This Unnameable Little Broom* (aka *The Epic of Gilgamesh*: Considering the Process of Criticism

In the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (ca. 2000 BCE) the king's despotic rule is challenged by the creation of a wild man, Enkidu. Gilgamesh traps Enkidu by enticing him to have sex with one of the temple prostitutes, Shamhat. Gilgamesh and Enkidu eventually become friends until the latter's death and the former's redemption (see Hooker, 1996). The Quay's film loosely based on this tale has as its central character a Punch-like figure who appears to represent Gilgamesh who resides in room apparently suspended in a

vast, black void and run through by vibrating wires although not, it would seem, suspended from these. Gilgamesh moves around his constricted domain on a tricycle and the first part of the film shows him preparing a number of traps, the most important of which is a table with an engraving of a female torso's interior (on which more below). He baits the table by placing a chirruping cricket into a drawer at the front of it and appears to finalise his procedures by melting an ice-cube on the tabletop.

Gilgamesh disappears and a tense montage creates an eerie state of suspension. A winged shadow heralds Enkidu's approach and he is represented as a composite figure, similar to Švankmajer's fantastic animal assemblages, with butterfly wings and a rodent's skull for a head. Enkidu approaches the table which springs open to reveal an optical viewing device similar to an old peepshow machine. As Enkidu peers through the lens he is captivated by a piece of meat, resembling a small heart, suspended on the end of a pendulum. The drawer opens to reveal a pulsating meat vagina accompanied by an incessant insect chirp. He mounts and caresses the table and the trap is sprung.

The tabletop catapults him into the overhead wires which are strung through the room. Enkidu rushes out, extracts the cricket, throws it into the void and then falls asleep with his hand protruding through one of the walls into the abyss. Out of which, when he awakes, he drags a golden-yellow cloth which now contains Enkidu. Gilgamesh ties him up with thread, beats him with a thorny rose branch and finally cuts off his wings with a pair of scissors. The film ends with a shot of a dandelion forest, seen briefly early on, in which shadows play. This shot is intercut with Gilgamesh pedaling furiously in circles around the table-trapped Enkidu.

The simplest interpretation of the film is that it is the Quays' representation of their own sense of being trapped

by restrictive visa regulations which were threatening to deport them from the UK. The very first shot of the film is of a visa number (Z4992/3) and the title, as discussed below, is a reference to London's immigration office in Croydon.

However, in discussing this particular film, I wish to concentrate on Steve Weiner's reading of the film in his article "The Quay Brothers' *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the 'Metaphysics of Obscenity'" (1997) as I think that this will demonstrate some of the problems of discussing the Quay Brothers in particular and film, perhaps, in general. Weiner's work is detailed and provides numerous illustrations of the Quays' sources. It is this emphasis on the testimony of the Quays as to the relevance of particular images or objects that I want to highlight. I will argue that this strategy of reading the film as filled with signs of prior influences metaphorically echoes the existential theme of the film. Of course, it may be that this is the only theme possible in all films.

Weiner's paper is divided into four sections: an introduction, "Influences", "The child-adult sexual axis" and "The metaphysics of puppet theatre". In each of these parts he is mainly concerned with excavating the references (or what I have called allusions) that occur in the film. Only at one point does he offer an interpretation of the film but this is not central to his discussion. I am interested in what this process of scholarly work might add to an understanding of the film (and, following from this, what we might mean by "understanding" a film).

In his introduction, Weiner provides information as to the funding of the film and the way in which Keith Griffiths and Allan Passes' original treatment for the film (originally destined to be a "9-episode, 52-minute film for actors, dancers and life-size rod puppets based on the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*") was changed when the Quays

took over the project and re-imagined the film in terms of Rafael Alberti's surrealist poem, *Sobre des Angels* (Concerning the Angels, 1927-28) (Weiner, 1997, p. 26). He also reproduces a sketch by the Quay Brothers which was an early design for the "woman-table", which Gilgamesh uses to trap Enkidu. Weiner explains what design ideas and which actual objects were re-used from the Quays' earlier films in this new one:

> The revolving or exposed set in darkness, with pathological electrical devices, came from *Punch* and *Ein Brudermord*. […] The angel, glued with feathers, mandibles, bird cartilage, and conch shell from *Janacek*, became Enkidu. […] A word on the wall, *Tabak*, a Belgian cigarette, became a calligraphed *Tepek* on a wall. (Weiner, 1997, p. 27)

It is clear that this information is not available from merely viewing the film. It is, however, not clear what use it is to know that *Tepek* is a corruption of a Belgian cigarette brand other than a merely trivial identification of fact. Weiner's source for all this information is the Atelier Koninck's private archive and, as we shall see, he is primarily interested in the *testimony* of the Quay Brothers concerning the production of their film. He goes on to explain the way in which the set lighting was designed, giving the exact measurements of the set itself. The method of constructing the puppets is also described (Weiner, 1997, pp. 27-28).

In "Influences" Weiner carefully traces the allusions within the film, often basing his insight on material that the Quays have themselves written about the film or have communicated to him directly. In quite fascinating detail he explores the following references: European folklore, Assyrian epic, European puppet theatre, schizophrenic painters,[100] castration,[101] surrealism, the anatomist M.A.E

[100] The Quays themselves (it is nearly impossible not to play this game) refer to the three artists to whom they originally dedicated the film (Adolf Wöllfli, Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern

Gautier d'Agoty (whose illustration of a woman's organs adorns the woman-table trap), the Austrian fable writer, Konrad Bayer and finally the use of a "private icon" (Weiner, 1997, pp. 28-33). After this exhaustive list, Weiner writes that "the Quays were far too complicated to have had as sources only those mentioned here" (1997, p. 32). This would imply that there is a certain veneration for the Quays since they know more than any interpreter might about the references made in their films. This epistemological deification of the Quays allows the interpreter to seek out allusions in the secure knowledge that this fund will never be exhausted since the Brothers will always be "far too complicated". The job of the critic is secure.

Let us consider in more detail the problem of the "private icon", which is how the films as a whole could be read. The symbol particularly noted by Weiner is the "broken tennis racket in high-tension wires" (1997, p. 32). The Quays offer a reading of this "icon" (although I will use the

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and Heinrich Anton Muller) as "alien" artists (Habib, 2001, internet).

[101] Weiner does not specifically refer to psychoanalysis here and his understanding of Gilgamesh as a castrating figure is based on the Quays' own reports. He quotes them from their programme notes to the film on the "sound of the buzz-saw": "bizarre…perverse, the quality of the steely tinge of a vagina with metal lips" (The Brothers Quay, *In Deciphering the Pharmacist's Prescription on Lip Reading Puppets*. Program notes or press release for *Street of Crocodiles* (1986), Griffith's clipping file in Weiner, 1997, p. 31). Rikki Ducornet discusses *The Unnameable Little Broom* in terms of the figure of the "Death Cunt" and relates this closely to the way in which the whore, Shamhat, is used to trap and weaken Enkidu in the original *Epic of Gilgamesh*: "Shamhat shows Enkidu her naked body and she *shows him the things a woman knows how to do* [Ferry's translation]; *for six days and seven nights Enkidu groans over her* [Kovacs] and then, in every version, he is so weakened by the encounter he can barely move. It is as if *life had left his body* [Mason]; as if his body *was bound…with a cord* [Sandars]". She describes the Quay film thus: "The Quays' Enkidu […] is lost embracing the promise of erotic delight. Prison cell and torture chamber, Gilgamesh's little house is suspended in limbo, ruled by rage, […] inescapable. Drawn like a moth to flame, Enkidu leaves the safety of the Cedar Woods to enter it and examine Gilgamesh's dazzling poison damsel. […] Overcome by the female seduction of space-time (her sex is also a pendulum) Enkidu leans into her, springing the trap. He is seized suspended in the air with wires" (Ducornet, 1999, p. 85).

word "symbol" to describe it from now on) in a letter to the composer for the film. The racket is tied up with the problems that the Quays were having at the time with their visas that allowed them to stay and work in the UK. The title, *Little Songs of the Chief Officer of Hunar Louse,*[102] evidently makes reference to Lunar House, the

> Office of Immigration and Passport Control in London. The broken tennis rackets on the wires meant "one more person made to conform, useless as a tennis racket thirty miles from Wimbledon". (Letter to composer; Weiner, 1997, p. 32)

While this explanation of the symbol makes sense, it is difficult to know whether such an interpretation could be made from viewing the film alone. The Quays, in a 1971 interview about their early student film, *Palais en Flammes*, provide the following anecdote as to its origin:

> The one scene we really liked was when the main character comes strutting down the street underneath the telephone wires. The girl is retreating into a corner and she grabs a tennis raquet to ward off the man advancing on her. Well, it happened to us this summer; there was a tennis raquet that was broken. It was hung on the telephone wires and I asked this guy how it got up there. He said "I think it was broken and this kid just tossed it up there". I went running out there with the camera — I shot it, and when the film came back, it had run off. So we went into our garage and broke a tennis raquet and threw it up on the telephone wires in our backyard. My brother sat in a wheelbarrow and I pushed him backwards and forwards underneath while we filmed it. This was the real key to that sequence — a little event like that. (quoted in Hammond, 1987, p. 64)

This explanation has no interpretation attached to it and only gives the banal biographical facts of the brothers' first encounter with the form of the symbol. This is then taken and used by the Quays in different contexts with, it seems, changeable meanings. This production of a private symbol can usefully be understood in the context of Ludwig

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[102] Weiner misquotes the title as *Songs of the Chief of the Officers of Lunar House* (1997, p. 33).

Wittgenstein's discussion of the possibility of a private language.[103]

Following a discussion of Derrida's critique of Husserl's phenomenology and his discussion of language,[104] John Ellis goes on to discuss the concept of a private language that can only be understood by one person. Wittgenstein argues that such a language is impossible since the notion of "communicating" with oneself alone makes no sense. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein puts the problem thus:

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[103] "But I think that for many of us the prime relevance of an anthropological approach to the study of symbolism is its attempt to grapple as empirically as possible with the basic human problem of what I would call disjunction - a gap between the overt superficial statement of action and its underlying meaning. On the surface, a person is saying or doing something which our observations or inferences tell us should not be simply taken at face value - it stands for something else, of greater significance to him" (Firth, 1973, p.26).

[104] Ellis summarises: "Derrida's criticism of Husserl's philosophy [in *Speech and Phenomena*] of language takes two paths. First, he tries to refine and clarify Husserl's conception of a purified sign that functions to identify the object of sense in pure presence and that lacks in itself a sensuous aspect. Second, he endeavors to show that such a sign, and the conception of presence it supports, is only made possible by that which it must exclude: the sign as a spatial and temporal entity, and hence as something that cannot be present in the sense required by Husserl" (Ellis, 1995, p. 56). In other words, Husserl believes that it is possible to apprehend the object directly but Derrida points out that such an apprehension presupposes that one does *not* have direct access to the object. Ellis argues that "deconstruction can be seen as a kind of scepticism of a high power. It is as if Derrida tries to demonstrate once and for all the impossibility of knowledge of the world — to demonstrate, paradoxically, that scepticism is true. The skeptic is imprisoned in the veil of ideas or representations, unable to get out; nevertheless, he continues to believe in the possibility that there is a way out, that he can finally hook up his sense-impressions to the world. For Derrida, this belief animates the entire history of philosophy in its effort to secure the foundations of knowledge. Husserl's philosophy is the culmination of that history, in that he finally demonstrates the vantage point from which scepticism could be overcome. However, in Derrida's reading of Husserl, the overcoming of the philosophical problem of scepticism leads not to certainty, but to the undermining of certainty once and for all" (Ellis, 1995, p. 61). Ellis goes on to criticise Derrida for accepting the idea of presence as the foundation of philosophy and sees his deconstruction of the concept as missing the point, "simply barking up the wrong philosophical tree" (Ellis, 1995, p. 63).

> To this end [of keeping a diary about a recurring sensation] I associate it with the sign "S" and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation. I will remark first of all that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated. -- But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition. -- How? Can I point to the sensation? Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation -- and so, as it were, point to it inwardly. -- But what is this ceremony for? for that is all it seems to be! A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign. -- Well, that is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connection between the sign and the sensation. -- But "I impress it on myself" can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection right in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right'. (§258)

The sensation could not be understood to be a "sensation" without the prior existence of a grammar within which to express the possibility of this as a discrete experience. Thus Ellis writes that a "private language constantly trades on the idea of a language that is public and shareable" (Ellis, 1995, p. 66). We must, therefore, consider the Quays' enigmatic use of the broken tennis racket as a joke concerning the possibility of having a private symbol, which by definition is impossible. Thus, while they may offer various local definitions of that symbol as they use it in their films, the racket symbolises the possibility of a symbol that only they understand: an impossible symbol. If we understand the wires within which the racket, and later Enkidu himself, is caught to be a symbol of power or existence (or that they point towards the existence of a controlling power) then the racket cannot exist alone, outside the system which enables it to function as a symbol. This is why the racket is broken. We may imagine that there is a private meaning here, but, of course, the phrase "private meaning" is an oxymoron and it

is its oxymoronic status that is marked by the racket's breakage.[105]

To return to Weiner's article: in the section "The child-adult sexual axis", Weiner shows how the Quays' instructions to their composer clearly positions Gilgamesh as a being caught simultaneously in the worlds of the adult and of the child. It is at the end of this part, that Weiner, for the first time, ventures to give an explanation of the film without direct reference to the Quays' own views. It is clear that he is uncomfortable in doing so since before quoting Edmund Bergler, a psychiatrist, he states that this writer has "not [been] read by the Quays" (Weiner, 1997, p. 34). Weiner is careful to mark his departure from the Quays' testimony and perhaps protects himself already from the possibility that they may disagree with his reading. He reads Gilgamesh's violence, through Bergler's theories of child development, as a self-protective sadism:

> The child vicariously re-imagines the debased female as dominated by the "cruelty" of sexual intercourse. But, of course, the child doesn't understand sex. The prostitute-table, electrocution, meat and cricket are

[105] There are a number of such "private symbols" that reappear through the Quays' oeuvre and while some often have a certain obvious association (the thorn branch with aggression, for instance), all are radically overdetermined and functionally blank. Some of these symbols include: the thorn branch (in *Nocturna Artificialia*, *Gilgamesh* and *Stille Nacht II*), anamorphic paintings (in *Anamorphosis* and *Institute Benjamenta*), the ice cube (*Street of Crocodiles*), the ladder (*The Comb*), the dandelion (*Street of Crocodiles*), the trembling finger (*The Comb*, *Institute Benjamenta*), raw meat (*Street*), the tram and, of course, the puppet. All these recurring objects, by their enigmatic repetition, appear to hold some sort of key for an understanding of the Quays' films. However, it is not possible to interpret these symbols as anything other than as symbols for the possibility of such a universal key. They force the viewer not into a process of interpretation, but rather insist on the interruption of interpretation while still maintaining the illusion of the possibility of revelation. It would be possible to read each of these images as exemplary metaphors for this process. This issue is discussed with reference to Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* by Sorfa (1993). The sense of an emptiness at the centre of the riddle is explored explicitly by the Quays in *Institute Benjamenta*.

> images that a frightened child – or schizophrenic might create. (Weiner, 1997, p. 35)

This is what Weiner, following Bergler, calls the "metaphysics of obscenity" (p. 35), but it is not clear what general point Weiner might be making. Is he saying the Quay Brothers are frightened children or schizophrenics? Is he making a claim for the psychological truthfulness of the film since it reflects a supposedly universal maturation pattern? While there would seem to be some correlation between Bergler's ideas and *This Unnameable Little Broom*, the nature of the import of such a correlation remains obscure.

Weiner returns in his final section, "The metaphysics of puppet theatre", to a discussion of the European puppet tradition and points to its "disturbing nihilism" which denies a meaning behind the mask of the puppet:

> The play *appears* to communicate a profound message. Actually, it transcends nothing. Behind the lyrical sensations, the yearning, was an absolute lack of meaning. The puppet offered a mirror of existence, its compulsions and emotions, but without a soul. (Weiner, 1997, p. 35)

I would add that the lesson here is that it is an illusion to imagine that the non-puppet, the human, might have a transcendental soul. Weiner ends his article with an unanswered question:

> Was [*This Unnameable Little Broom*] a grotesque reduction of tableau II of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a recapitulation of the Oedipal dynamic, an allegory of sexual entrapment, a knockabout farce with deviant imagery, or a nihilist film that sadistically creates only illusions of deeper themes that are not there? (Weiner, 1997, p. 35)

Rhetorically, Weiner demands the answer "All of these! And more!", but it is clear that the film is merely the lure for attracting Weiner to try and explain what the film might be about. Thus the entrapment of Enkidu by Gulgamesh

within the diegesis of the film is played out in the snaring of the critic by the film itself (in *Gilgamesh* the table trap is an ocular viewing device). In this sense, *This Unnameable Little Broom* (or *Little Songs of the Chief Officer of Hunar Louse* – even its title is undecideable) is itself the McGuffin that sets in motion the critical enterprise. It is the critic's fetish – apparently laden with meaning but in fact a trap. However, this does not mean that the critic is not aware that it is a trap, since the critic relies on the trap's existence for his own justification.

A similar reading is possible for all the other Quay Brothers' films since their central theme is the impossibility of interpretation.[106]

6.9 The Oscillating Ball

While it is more usual in Quay criticism to pay attention to baroque objects that obviously have had a previous existence or at least have been made to appear as if they are old and used (damaged puppets, various outmoded implements), here I wish to trace the trajectory of a much less romantic object which inhabits many of the Quays' films: the white and perfectly round oscillating ball. It is in a consideration of this simple object that we will see most clearly the way in which the Quays' posit the animated object as something that both exists and is meaningful while simultaneously being something ineffable, non-diegetic and non-functional. It is this ball that is the sign of disavowal, or, rather, that this ball is a representation of the disavowal at the heart of the sign.

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[106] Readings along traditional critical lines, often combined with authorial interviews, are available for many of these films (Newman, 1986; Rayns, 1986; Cardinal, 1987; Atkinson, 1994; Wadley, 1997; Buchan, 1998; Carels, 2000; Habib, 2002; Miller, 2003).

The enigmatic sphere first appears in the "Metaphysical Playroom" sequence of *The Cabinet of Jan Švankmajer* where the child-puppet reclines on its back in a paper-lined room surrounded by three-dimensional geometrical objects, resembling children's building blocks, made of wood: pyramids, cones, various polygons and three round balls of varying size. The smaller ball begins to roll around of its own accord but its motion is not as smooth as the other animated objects because its motion is presented as slightly out of phase double exposure. The effect of this is to give the ball a slightly ephemeral and ghostly movement since there are often two transparent images of the sphere in the frame at any one time. This also gives the effect of extreme speed to the ball since it appears to be leaving behind a trace of its own movement.

The ball reappears in the final section of the film "The Child Receives a Lesson in 1/24th of a Second" when the librarian sets up his stop-motion camera. On a table to the right of the child the ball appears to be suspended in mid air but is actually perched on a white stick that blends into the background. Another ball rolls away from the couple and begins to fall down some stairs. The bouncing ball is arrested mid-way down the stairs in order to highlight the illusory nature of its movement. The librarian cranks the camera frame by frame, flitting between it and the ball on the table, adjusting it ever so slightly every time. The sequence ends with the ball bouncing naturalistically up and down on the table. The sphere thus represents animation in its simplest form. Even when the trick is revealed to us, it is impossible not to see the ball as being in motion. We both know and do not know that this is an illusion.

The shimmering illusion ball reappears in one of the Quays mostt bewildering film, *Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies* (1988), evidently inspired by Jean Honoré Fragonard's painting *Le Verrouo / The Bolt* (1778) which depicts a young

man gripping a woman while sliding to a bolt on her bedroom door. The painting is light and bright in contrast to the passion or violence – it is impossible to decide which – that is taking place. *Rehearsals* takes place in a complicated three-dimensional space that is lined with a wallpaper that appears to decorated with black stripes of barcodes. The main figure in the film is a grotesque puppet which has a twisted mass of thick wire for a body, a misshapen head with one eye, and a large mole, or spongy cancerous growth, which the puppet obsessively rubs with one of its wire ends. The editing rhythms of the film disturbingly match the fiddling of the puppet. The puppet's single eye oscillates madly in its socket. Its movement is double-exposed giving the eye a blurred quality.

The plain ball reappears, this time slowly bouncing up some steps. At the top of the steps it begins to vibrate – an effect caused by shooting the ball in two separate positions and then adding a double-exposure of the ball in both positions and finally oscillating between these frames. The effect is of a resonating tuning fork and one can easily imagine a pure tone emerging from this movement. This trembling resonance is a distinctive visual - but strangely non-aural – feature of almost all Quay films. The resonating ball appears frequently throughout the rest of the film, variously positioned in the air. Most distinctively it is visible in that part of the set which features two desolate looking puppets. Here, however, the manipulating hands of the brothers Quay are still visible on screen. It is as if they have not worried about removing themselves from the picture when the stop-motion camera photographs a frame. This gives the impression that behind the very realistic motion of the vibrating ball, a ghostly manipulator is present. This is, of course, the truth. This mysterious ball becomes ever-present in the *mise-en-scène* of the film. It is the sign of animation.

This vibrating ball is also a feature of the four short *Stille Nacht* films (1988 – 1993). Two of these, "Are We Still Married (*Stille Nacht* II)" (1991) and "Can't Go Wrong Without You (*Stille Nacht* IV)" (1993) are promotional videos for the 4AD band, His Name is Alive, and feature the rather maudlin, guitar-pop of this band. The two films feature an animated rabbit-puppet and the legs of an Alice-like girl who holds a ping-pong bat decorated with a heart-shaped vial on one side and a pair of eyes on the other. The bat sets in motion a white ping-pong ball which oscialltes madly throughout the clip, much to the annoyance of the rabbit who tries unsuccessfully to trap it. The film ends with the ball appearing to disappear back into the eyes on the bat as if it were a returning tear.

Stille Nacht IV is shot with an almost anamorphic distortion so that the familiar white ball now looks like an egg. A new character appears in this film besides the rabbit and the Alice-girl. This is a theatrically black-clad figure with a skull mask who appears to be the animtor (or animators). The movements of this person are marked by the same blurring double-exposure that characterize the movement of the ball. This film ends with blood dripping from Alice, in a fairly obvious menstrual manner, onto the ball/egg. Whether this is some form of creation myth that the Quays are depicting is unclear, but, once again, the ball functions as that thing in which the characters of the piece are most interested. It is the McGuffin and the fetish. It is and it isn't. This oscillation, which is not really an oscillation because both states exist simultaneously, not exclusively, and is the exemplary object of Quay disavowal.

6.10 *Street of Crocodiles*: "The Book" or The Logic of the Quays

Perhaps the Quay Brothers' most famous film, *Street of Crocodiles*, is based on the stories of the Polish school teacher, Bruno Schulz. The film follows a dilapidated but rather formal puppet as it explores a strange area, evidently the Street of Crocodiles. The environment, which may be the wings of a theatre, exists within a peepshow kinetograph[107] (designated as the "Wooden Esophagus") which is set in motion by the spittle of an old man (Feliks Stawinski) who has himself entered a theatre, enigmatically called the Archiv Gottinga. The film thus takes place in a film projecting machine (and throughout there is a play on lenses, mirrors and changes of focus) which is itself in a theatre.

As the machine begins to turn and work, the main puppet is woken by the tugging of a string by which it is attached to the object. The old man, still peering intently inside, carefully manoeuvres a pair of scissors to cut the puppet free. It sets off to explore the street and although there are a number of significant encounters – especially with the tailor dummies who begin to refurbish the main puppet but who also give it a striped box (a reference to Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1928)) into which they slip a much admired wooden shoe with a screw for a heel – the main focus of the pupper's discoveries seems to be in following the wires and threads on which the whole machine appears to run. As in the previous films discusses, these wires point towards some animating force that allows the current object to exist (in this case that force appears to come literally from the old man's bodily fluids). Roger Cardinal beautifully describes the way in

[107] It is, however, not easy to decide exactly what the "Esophagus" is since it also appears to function as some sort of film developer as well as a magnification device for a map (presumably of the location of the street).

which the animation of the film hints at the existence of this power:

> A row of rusted screws set deep within filthy old floorboards all at once are seen to revolve freely and to spring forth from their prison, to pirouette amid layers of breeding dust like spinning tops or hobgoblins. Their emergence out of darkness and time affords us a splendid image of a latent power, the presentiment of a lurking purposefulness. It is as though the *materia prima* of reality were astir with intentionality, as though, beyond the immediate frame, a wider world were beginning to experience a contagion of motion and expression such that all which now is dead might soon shift and vibrate, asserting a kinetic presence. (1987, p. 6)

However, the film is in fact a story of entropy rather than of a "contagion of motion". With its close-ups of dust and decay the film charts a disintegration rather than revivification and the self-unscrewing screws a sign of collapse rather invigoration. This is particularly true of the most enigmatic character in the film: a robotic figure with a light bulb for a head.

After the tender ministrations of the tailor dummies, they take the puppet to a grimy window through which it can see the robot cradled in the arms of a small baby-doll. As the wires of the machine slowly roll on, the screws keeping the robot together slowly unwind and the figure collapses. The doll watches the screws roll away in the dust and in a tender yet business-like manner it covers the light bulb with a black sack. The next shot consists of a screw revolving in the omnipresent dust to create the sign of a zero. The repetitive movements of the tailor dummies grind to a halt and after a final tracking shot in which the entire set is revealed, the puppet touches one of the animating threads, which gradually comes to a halt. The puppet itself freezes.

Suzanne Buchan stresses the phenomenological prior existence of the materials of the film:

> The sets and puppets exist […]. Yet although the events we see on screen *did not* occur, the objects *do* exist. Puppet animation thus represents a different "world" for the spectator, something between "*a* world," created with the animation technique, and "*the* world," in its use of real objects and not representational drawings. (p. 103)

Indeed, the actual set of *Street of Crocodiles* was on display in the now defunct Museum of the Moving Image in London. The film takes as its theme the reality of objects and its use of extreme close-ups forces the viewer to consider the "reality" of the objects it shows: ice, dandelions, meat, dust, screws. But it is this very sense of reality, newly animated and filled with some sort of meaning, that the film necessarily undermines in its representation of that reality. Buchan argues for a fetishistic relationship with the film in that it is both real and unreal. Pual Hammond writes:

> Quay animation is nudged *nature-morte*. A nudge and a wink, the wink of shutter and film-frame. In Quay animation it gratifies us to see dead nature creep and crawl, shimmy and sing. Yet there is a contradiction at the core of this seething animism: it is pure artifice, the product of clandestine manipulation – the changing of the position of the subject between single-frame exposures, known as *pixillation* – and of complex calibration – because not only is the subject pixillated, but the recording apparatus is too, the net result being seamless camera movement and change of focus. (1987, p. 54)

In contrast to Buchan, Hammond seems to be arguing that the strong impression of reality that the film leaves is its primary trap. It is this disavowal of reality that the film overtly presents – it constantly reminds us that disavowal is at work through its framing structure and through the medium of the animating wires – and so denies any comfortable fetishism to exist. The fetish becomes uncanny, but, as had been argued above, perhaps the fetish must always already be uncanny.

While the relationship between Bruno Schulz's *Street of Crocodiles*[108] and the Quay Brothers' film has often been commented on and explored (probably most fully by Miller (2003, pp. 86-97)[109]), here I wish to consider in some detail the first story of his less well-known second collection, *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* (*Sanatorium pod klepsydra*, 1937). While this may seem to be another exercise in allusion hunting, another doomed attempt to discover the key to Quay, it is really an acknowledgement of the *mise en abyme* logic of the *unheimlich* as the ultimate end of criticism.

The first story in *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* is "The Book" and the narrator describes the loss of a book, to which he also refers as the "Authentic", which he had seen as a young child on his father's desk:

> The Book…Somewhere in the dawn of childhood, at the first daybreak of life, the horizon had brightened with its gentle glow. The Book lay in all its glory on my father's desk, and he, quietly engrossed in it, patiently rubbed with a wet fingerprint the top of decals, until the blank pages grew opaque and ghostly with a delightful foreboding and, suddenly flaking off in bits of tissue, disclosed a peacock-eyed fragment; blurred with emotion, one's eyes turned towards a virgin dawn of divine colors, towards a

[108] This is the title under which Schulz's book has been published in English (although the first 1963 English translation by Celina Wieniewska had the original title), but appeared in Polish under the title *Cinnamon Shops* (*Sklepy cynamonowe*) in 1934. This collection of fifteen short stories contains the three parts of "Treatise on Tailors' Dummies" and "The Street of Crocodiles", which form the main part of the subject for the Quay film. See Jerzy Ficowski's description of the genesis of this book in Chapters 4 and 5, "The Prehistory and Origin of *Cinnamon Shops*" and "The Book, Childhood Regained", in his authoritative biography of Schulz, *Regions of the Great Heresy* (2003, pp. 57-80).

[109] Although this is a minor point, Miller claims that "only after the publication of *Cinnamon Shops* did Schulz venture into the international field, with a translation of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*" (2003, p. 87). This translation was, in fact, done by Schulz'z fiancée, Józefina Szelínska, as Ficowski explains: "Since his name was known from the publication of *Cinnamon Shops*, he 'loaned' it to his fiancée for her translation of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, which she, unknown in literary circles, would not otherwise have been able to publish. He advised her on corrections in the text, and the book appeared in 1936 as a translation by Bruno Schulz" (Ficowski, 2003, p. 112).

> miraculous moistness of purest azure. (Schulz, 1979, p. 1)

The Book represents the possibility of true and unmediated communication. Schulz describes it in terms of "rapture" and "brilliance" and assumes a secret knowledge with the reader of the present story: "For, under the imaginary table that separates me from my readers. Don't we secretly clasp each other's hands" (1979, p. 1). Unlike the two protagonists in Švankmajer's central section, "Passionate Discourse" of *Dimensions of Dialogue* who, although they can momentarily join in ecstasy, are never in communication with each other, Schulz imagines language as a separator (the table) which it is possible to circumvent through some other form of contact (the touch beneath the table). The Book is described in the first sentence as an object which cannot be comprehended but which guarantees the possibility of comprehension itself:

> I am simply calling it The Book without any epithets or qualifications, and in this sobriety there is a shade of helplessness, a silent capitulation before the vastness of the transcendental, for no word, no allusion, can adequately suggest the shiver of fear, the presentiment of a thing without name that exceeds all our capacity for wonder. (Schulz, 1979, p.1)

This "thing without name" is that which guarantees the possibility of naming, but this naming will always be deficient since the thing it names cannot exist beyond naming. It is also significant to note that Schulz describes the time of The Book as a time when "My mother had not appeared yet. I spent my days alone with my father in our room, which at the time was as large as the world" (1979, p.2). In psychoanalytic accounts of childhood, it is generally the mother who is positioned as the archaic figure who precedes, both literally and phantasmatically, the appearance of the father in the form of the Symbolic (Creed, 1993, pp. 16-30; Kristeva, 1982). Schulz, however, places the realm of the Authentic within the father's space

and sees the appearance of the mother as the point where mundane and corrupted reality begins. He writes:

> Then my mother materialized, and that early, bright idyll came to an end. Seduced by mother's caresses, I forgot my father, and my life began to run along a new and different track with no holidays and no miracles. I might even have forgotten The Book forever, had it not been for a certain night and a certain dream. (1979, p. 2)[110]

The narrator begins to dream, on waking up it should be noted, of the "old, forgotten Book" and desperately searches through his father's bookshelves looking for it and his parents try and give him various books until his father gives him a Bible, at which point the narrator cries: "Why do you give me that fake copy, that reproduction, a clumsy falsification?" (1979, p. 3). The father averts his eyes.

Weeks go by and "the image of The Book continued to burn in memory with a bright flame" and his father tells him:

> "As a matter of fact, there are many books. The Book is a myth in which we believe when we are young, but which we cease to take seriously as we get older". (1979, p. 3)

However, the narrator knows that this is not true since he already has in his possession "some tattered remnants of The Book" (1979, p.4) which he came across during a sexually charged encounter with a servant cleaning his room. As he leans against her from behind he sees that she is reading some papers on his desk. Even though these pages were already on his desk ("Where did you find this book?", "You silly boy," she answered shrugging her shoulders. "It

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[110] This specifically gendered aspect of the place of The Book is not one that can be fully addressed here, but it should be noted that the space of true communication must itself precede the banal distinction between male and female and that The Book's existence within the realm of the father does not necessarily mark that space as somehow more "real" than the space of the mother. In the logic of The Book, both mother and father are made possible by the Authentic and not the other way around.

has been lying here all the time; we tear a few pages from it every day and take them to the butcher's for packing meat or your father's lunch…" (1979, p. 5)[111]), it is only at this moment that the narrator realised that they are pages from The Book. He describes the content:

> On a large folio page there was a photograph of a rather squat and short woman with a face expressing energy and experience. From her head flowed an enormous stole of hair, which fell heavily down her back trailing its thick ends on the ground. It was an unbelievable freak of nature, a full and ample cloak spun out of the tendrils of hair. It was hard to imagine that its burden was not painful to carry, that it did not paralyze the head from which it grew. (Schulz, 1979, p. 4)

Hair as a symbol has been discussed at length elsewhere in this thesis, but it would seem apposite that one of the extended descriptions of the contents of The Book should be on the banal but charged symbol of hair.[112] The story of the hairy woman, Anna Csillag, is reported:

> By divine will, Anna Csillag had been struck with a poor growth of hair. All her village pitied her for this disability, which they tolerated because of the exemplary life she led, although they suspected it could not have been entirely undeserved. But, lo and behold, her ardent prayers were heard, the curse removed from her head, and Anna Csillag was graced with the blessing of enlightenment. She received signs and portents and concocted a mixture, a miraculous nostrum that restored fertility to her scalp. […] Anna Csillag became the benefactress of her village, on which the blessing of wavy heads of hair and enormous fringes had descended, and whose

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[111] Note again Figure 257 from *Street of Crocodiles* in which the puppet miraculously produces a liver over a map of Poland and proceeds to pin it with "translucent sizing paper" (Miller, 2003, p. 97).

[112] In *Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies* (1987), the strand of hair becomes the central, enigmatic figure of possible meaning. It echoes the stretched power lines evident in other Quay films, while also being an integral part of the bar code which is, of course, absolutely indecipherable. The central puppet figure worries a wart on its forehead and the abject hair growing out of it eventual breaks off. The puppet's body itself consists of a twisted coil of wire and the implication seems to be that it is this filament which is the basis of existence, the *prima materia*, of the Quay universe, just as undifferentiated clay is the fundament of Švankmajer's world.

> male inhabitants, henceforth, could sweep the ground with their beards like broad besoms. Anna became the apostle of hairiness. (1979, pp. 4-5)

The narrator is overwhelmed by recognition: "This was The Book, its last pages, the unofficial supplement, the tradesmen's entrance full of refuse and trash!" (p. 5). As we know from Derrida, it is the supplement that ensures the possibility of the original (Derrida, 1976, pp. 141-164) and it is precisely in the worthlessness of the content of The Book that the transcendental can exist. The mundane and vaguely pornographic nature of the story both belies and corroborates pages as those of the Authentic. There is the implication also that the Authentic exists differently for every person, much in the same way the each person has his or her own door through which she can never enter before the law (Kafka, 1999b, pp. 235-237; Derrida, 1992). The Authentic is both everything and nothing.

Nevertheless, on examining The Book more carefully the narrator realises that "not many [pages] remained. Not a single page of the real text, nothing but advertisements and personal announcements" (Schulz, 1979, p. 5).[113] He considers these notices with great attention and is sucked into a world of fantasy by each one but "later on, the miserable remains of The Book became ever more depressing. The pages were now given over to a display of boring quackery" (1979, p. 8). One of these charlatans, Signor

[113] It is tempting here to imagine that Schulz's short story contains every aspect of the Quays' oeuvre: their own experimental films being partly funded through their creation of advertisements, mainly for American television. These include advertisements for Round-Up weed killer, Coca-Cola, Slurpee (in which they echo the upside woman of *Institute Benjamenta*, itself a reference to Toyen's *Relâche*, 1943), Kellogs' Rice Krispies Treats and a series for Fox Television and the National Hockey League. While all these are either entirely animated or include animated sequences, there are two advertisements that are live-action only: a Kurosawa pastiche for Murphy's Stout and some rather vulgar spots for ITV and Doritos. Perhaps their most ill advised commercial piece is an anti-drugs advert for the PSA National Drug Council which makes a misleading and sensationalist link between all drug use and AIDS. It is unfortunate that it is this advertisement that most closely resembles their experimental film work. For an extended discussion of the misrepresentation of drug use in film, see Sorfa (2000).

Bosco, advertises himself as a "master of black magic" and makes a "long and obscure appeal, demonstrating something with the tips of his fingers without clarifying anything" (1979, p. 8). This image should bring to mind one of the Quays' recurrent images: the trembling finger; while the figure of the mage who may or may not have the key to all questions should also be familiar from *The Cabinet of Jan Švankmajer* (as well as being an apt overarching description of the Quays' work as a whole: vague intimations of occult significance). The narrator is still, however, entranced by The Book: "this was the authentic Book, the holy original, however degraded and humiliated at present" (1979, p. 9).

There then follows a short treatise on the ontological condition of The Book, towards the status of which all other books strive, and the reader's attention is drawn to one particular insight: "The Authentic lives and grows" (1979, p. 10). This is taken to mean that whenever The Book is opened again its contents would have altered in some way and that "it unfolds while being read, its boundaries open to all currents and fluctuations" (1979, p. 11). The Book does not have a content as such, but rather is created in the act of reading; or, in other words, allows the process of reading to begin. As such, The Authentic can be (and is) anything at all (and, of course, is nothing). It is this particular logic (that I have also called the logic of the McGuffin or of the fetish) that particularly informs the Quays' feature length film, *Institute Benjamenta* (1995).

6.11 *Institute Benjamenta*: Institutions of Desire

In many ways *Institute Benjamenta* is the most extreme of the Quays' films in that it so obviously denies any inner meaning or significance. The Quays themselves have noted that perhaps the film should have been either much shorter than its 104 minutes or that it should have been much longer (citing Béla Tarr's 7 1/2 hour long *Satantango*

(1994)) in order to truly present the experience of senselessness (Habib, 2002). Based on Robert Walser's *Jakob von Gunten* (1909),[114] the story follows the entry of the insubordinate Jakob (Mark Rylance) into a school for the training of servants run by a brother (Gottfried John) and sister (Alice Krige as Lisa Benjamenta).

The film begins with the inscription: "Ratsel / The Riddle" and this forms a short prologue. The riddle is read out, over an image of two trembling forks, in German, with English subtitles:

> Who dares it – has no courage
> To whom it is missing – feels well
> Who owns it – is bitterly poor
> Who is successful – is damaged
> Who gives it – is as hard as stone
> Who loves it stays alone

Institute Benjamenta is visually structured around two images: the vibrating object and the zero.[115] Throughout the film objects are stung into oscillations and their sound reverberates on the soundtrack. These are usually forks, bells, shadows or fingers. This image is on the one hand a literalisation of Walser's prose:

> It is no coincidence that Walser's writing is often described as being full of musical analogies and metaphors. The stars and sun sing, a room possesses a precious tone, a girl's gentleness is like a stream of notes; he compared nights to black sounds, someone enjoys his slowness like a melody or a city affects him like a symphony. (Buchan, 1998, p. 13)

On the other, the notion of oscillation, of only existing in an in-between space, is a central theme of the film. The students in the Institute are waiting for something to

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[114] Reprinted under the title *Institute Benjamenta* in 1995 to tie in with the film's release – another example of the way in which the Quays' films may be seen to function as a museum of obscure literature.

[115] Another major image in the film is the stag in the forest, but while this figure is used to convey a sense of brooding sexuality, it does not materially structure the film. For a discussion of this leitmotif see Buchan (1998, p. 15).

happen: for them to become educated, to find a job, to move on to something else. While they are in the Institute they are in the space between their earlier and future lives, they are in the space of the vibration. It is, of course, significant that the structure of disavowal in the fetish is often referred to, perhaps erroneously, as an oscillation.

The zero, represented by a circle is obsessively paraded throughout the film and is particularly associated with the character, Kraus (Daniel Smith), a fellow student of Jakob's, who is described in the novel as "fidelity in person, ardent service and unobtrusive, selfless obligingness" (Walser, 1995, p. 40)[116]. There is no subtlety in the presentation of the figure of the zero in the film. During the credit sequence, the film's subtitle, "This Dream People Call Human Life", appears over a circular wreath made of twigs and the next shot is of an exhibit label (of which a number appear in the film) reading "The Beatification of Zero". There is no mystery at all from the beginning as to what the mystery is. We are given the answer to the riddle as soon as it is posed: the answer is nothing. Here we have an almost parodic presentation of the McGuffin or *objet petit a*; "almost parodic" since the film's existence is presupposed by the zero and therefore cannot be an absolute parody (a real parody would be the presentation of no film at all). The film then proceeds to present the image of the zero as circle repeatedly: the students draw chalk circles on the floor using pieces of string as compasses; peepholes peered through often give result in an round-iris point-of-view shot; Jakob's room has round windows both in its ceiling and walls; Herr Benjamenta applies lipstick in a round mirror; a chalk

[116] Much later in the book Kraus is described thus: "Kraus loves and hates nothing, therefore he is a Croesus, something in him verges on the inviolable. He's like a rock, and life, the stormy wave, breaks against his virtues. […] One can hardly love him, to hate him is unthinkable" (Walser, 1995, p. 117). In the film, Kraus appears as the guardian of the zero in the final sequence when we see him seated behind the goldfish tank. He is the zero of the zero.

circle on the blackboard allows Jakob and Lisa to enter the hidden chambers.

When Jakob enters the Institute, he immediately imagines that something is wrong ("I regarded the Benjamenta school as a swindle" (Walser, 1995, p. 9)) and his suspicions deepen when Herr Benjamenta immediately demands money from him:

> "Give it to me, then. Quickly!" he commanded, and strange to relate, I obeyed at once, although I was shaking with misery. I was now quite certain that I had fallen into the clutches of a robber and swindler, and all the same I obediently laid the school fees down. (1995, pp. 9-10)

However, Jakob's initial defiance quickly recedes and he becomes a diligent student and begins to resign himself to his position in life. He says in voice-over, "There is just one lesson here, endlessly repeated over and over again. One will learn very little here. None of us will amount to much." The lesson is exactly that one will not amount to much, that one will remain a zero. It is, however, in being zero that one is given a purpose and is therefore not a zero. Thus the zero proliferates.

The everyday drudgery of the Institute is, however, spiked by the possible existence of a secret. Jakob wonders about the couple: "What are they always doing there, in their apartment? How do they keep themselves busy? Are they poor? Are the Benjamentas poor?" (Walser, 1995, p. 16). These questions are never answered in the book, although the film sexualises the relationship between brother and sister very overtly, with Herr Benjamenta portrayed as a lascivious threat (his interactions with Jakob are also heavily sexualised and he is presented as being androgynously perverse). During the credits of *Institute Benjamenta*, Fräulein Benjamenta dreams of an indistinct forest (an image familiar from the anamorphic landscape of *The Comb*) through which flits a vague figure. While the subtitle

reads "From far off I am being approached", Lisa Benjamenta's voiceover (uttered in Alice Krige's native Afrikaans) is not in the passive voice. She says: "*Van ver af benader iets of iemand*" which literally translates as: "From far off something or someone approaches" and implies a much more immediate threat. This threat is fulfilled in Lisa's mysterious death towards the end of the story and while we may read this "*iets of iemand*" as either, in terms of plot logic, Jakob himself, since his entry to the Institute follows soon after this sequence, or as her lust-filled brother, actually this something or other can only be death itself. Just as the film begins with its answer (nothing), so Lisa realizes that when she wakes she will be in the story that will inevitably end with her death.

While the nothingness of death is the Institute's ultimate secret (its *heimlich unheimlich*, if you will), there are rumours of a hidden space in the building:

> There are "Inner Chambers" here. I have never been in them to this day. […] But perhaps one day I shall penetrate into these inner chambers. And what will my eyes discover then? Perhaps nothing special at all? Oh, yes, something special. I know it, somewhere here there are marvelous things. (Walser, 1995, p. 16)

Both in film and novel, however, the inner chambers are revealed somewhat enigmatically. At what might be considered the climax of a rather anti-climactic plot, Fräulein Benjamenta leads Jakob into the Institute, "resolved to show me a world that had been hidden until now" (1995, p. 82). At the bottom of some stone steps, they come to "moist, soft earth" and the Fräulein says that they are "now in the vaults of poverty and deprivation" (p. 83). The journey to this occult world is presented in the film as a literal journey into the zero – Lisa takes the blindfolded Jakob into the classroom and leads him through a chalk circle drawn on the blackboard into an ethereal space (we see the circle being drawn by Kraus only much later in the plot. Kraus is also seen earlier crossing the

cathedral space with buckets of water). They move down the staircase into the chambers. Here, in the novel, Lisa tells Jakob to "fondle" the "Wall of Worries" and he flings himself against the "stony breast" but "remained unmoved". Paradoxically, he then claims:

> I play-acted, to please my instructress, certainly, and yet again it was anything but play-acting that I was doing. (1995, p. 83)

The film rather misses this doubling of the illusion. Lisa grips some wrought iron railings and hoists herself gymnastically so that her feet point upwards. Jakob gropes towards her and buries his face in her crotch. The relating here of female genitals with the zero is somewhat crude but the image of the upside-down woman is taken from the Czech surrealist painter, Toyen's (Marie Čermínová), *Relâche* (1943). The painting's title means "No performance" and, while this may link to Jakob's confusion about play-acting, the image creates a sense of vulnerability and violence related to Toyen's interest in Sade. Whitney Chadwick comments on *Relâche*:

> A young girl hangs upside down in an attitude often assumed by children playing on a gymnastic bar. The folds of her skirt hide the head and upper body, the feet merge imperceptibly with the fissured and stained wall, and the flesh and exposed lace-trimmed panties lend a virginal air reminiscent of Balthus's [Balthazar Klossowski de Rola] young dreamers. But the figure has become terrifyingly impersonal and the objects that surround her – a riding crop and an empty paper bag – introduce an air of perverse danger into this erotic tableau in which nothing happens. (Chadwick, 1985, p. 117)

In the film, Lisa's voice-over is fraught and full of foreboding, almost comically so, while in the novel the couple move into a magical space of freedom:

> And with her small white familiar cane she touched the wall, and the whole horrible cellar disappeared and we found ourselves on a smooth, spacious, narrow track of ice or glass [*Institute Benjamenta* again

> literalises this image as a mirror]. We floated along it, as if in marvelous skates, and we were dancing, too, for like a wave the track rose and fell beneath us. It was delightful. I had never seen anything like it and I shouted for joy: "How glorious!" (Walser, 1995, p. 84)

The Quays allow no such respite for Jakob and the Benjamentas (in the novel, Jakob leaves the Institute, at least initially, to go on errands or meet his brother). Lisa explains to Jakob "This is freedom" and that "one must always keep moving […], one must dance in freedom."[117] She warns of freedom:

> It is cold and beautiful. Never fall in love with it! That would only make you sad afterwards, for one can only be in the realm of freedom for a moment, no longer. (Walser, 1995, p. 84)

Even such a fleeting liberation is denied to the inhabitants of *Institute Benjamenta*. However, both book and film reverse Jakob's ecstatic experience of the hidden interior when Jakob, without preamble, announces his discovery of the inner chambers later, as if this previous episode had never taken place. As the situation in the Institute becomes more bleak and the students are "still caught in the iron talons of the numerous rules and indulge in didactic, monotonous repetitions", Jakob announces:

> Also, I've been at last, in the *authentic* inner chambers, and I must say, they don't exist. […] The furniture is frugal and ordinary in the extreme, and there's nothing mysterious about them at all. Strange. How did I get the mad idea that the Benjamentas live in chambers. Or was I dreaming, and is the dream over now? (Walser, 1995, pp. 108-109: my emphasis)

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[117] One might wish to relate this to Jacques Derrida's discussion of Emma Goldman's pronouncement: "If I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution". He responds to an interviewer's citation: "It was a good idea to begin with a quotation, one by a feminist from the end of the nineteenth century maverick enough to ask of the feminist movement its questions and conditions. Already, already a sign of life, a sign of the dance" (Derrida, 1995, p. 90).

The implication of the word "authentic" is that the chambers that Jakob had visited with Fräulein Benjamenta were some sort of fake or illusion and that the whole experience may only have occurred in his imagination. The film loses this equivocation and Jakob says: "I have finally been inside the inner chambers, and I have to say they don't exist. Instead of a mystery there is only a goldfish". The prosaic goldfish also exists in the textual Jakob's chambers:

> As a matter of fact, there are goldfish[118] there and Kraus and I regularly have to empty and clean the tank in which these animals swim and live, and then fill it with fresh water. But is there anything remotely magical about that? (Walser, 1995, p. 109)

The film's exposure of this non-secret secret appears from the very beginning with the zero-shaped fish tank, tended by Kraus, making an enigmatic appearance just before Jakob arrives at the Institute. The goldfish bowl's distinctive pedestal and its effect of fish-eye lens distortion effect appear regularly after Jakob's discovery, and it is this warped vision that defines the scene of Jakob's departure from the Institute.

Just before Lisa's unexplained death ("Jakob, I am dying because I have found no love" (Walser, 1995, p. 120), Herr Benjamenta entreats Jakob to leave with him:

> And now I'm asking you, you scamp, who have bound me with such peculiar and happy chains, will you go along with me, shall we stay together, start something together, do and dare and achieve something, shall we both, you the little one and I the big one, try to stand up to life together? (Walser, 1995, pp. 123-124)

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[118] In the original German text, Walser uses the word "*Goldfische*" here (Walser, 1978, p. 131). It is tempting to remember that the non-Anglicised word for goldfish in German is "*Schleierschwanz*", which literally means "penis fog", and there may be a dim echo here of the conflation of sexuality and confusion with which the novel is suffused.

The Fräulein dies during this speech. After an initial period of hesitation during which all the students find positions and leave the Institute, including Kraus,[119] Jakob decides to leave with Herr Benjamenta and the final paragraph of the novel evocatively celebrates the end of both his life in the Institute and of the novel itself. This valediction is an acceptance of death (both his and Lisa's) and it is clear that the Institute is an existential metaphor for life itself (in this way, the film and novel are very much a counterpart to Švankmajer's *The Flat* and the delight in stopping writing brings to mind Kafka's tortuous relationship to writing). Jakob ends:

> The pupils, my friends, are scattered in all kinds of jobs. And if I am smashed to pieces and go to ruin, what is being smashed and ruined? A zero. The individual me is only a zero. But now I'll throw away my pen! Away with the life of thought! I'm going with Herr Benjamenta into the desert. […] I don't want to think of anything more now. Not even of God? No! God will be with me. What should I need to think of Him? God goes with thoughtless people. So now adieu, Benjamenta Institute. (Walser, 1995, p. 136)

The Quays reconfigure this wonderful ending in quite a complex manner. Herr Benjamenta comes to Jakob's book and implores him: "Follow me out of this world. Forever" and Jakob's head arches back in a gesture familiar from many other Quay films (especially *Street of Crocodiles* and *In Absentia*). There is a cut to the two men walking in a snowstorm and it appears as if they are in a toy snow-globe[120] - of course, the two men are in the goldfish bowl - and the camera slowly zooms out to reveal Kraus staring into the bowl and dropping in fish food (making it seem as

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[119] Jakob writes: "I have had to say goodbye to Kraus. Kraus has gone. A light, a sun, has disappeared. I feel that from now on it could only be evening in the world and all around me" (Walser, 1995, p. 127). This final line appears in the film, spoken in voice-over by Jakob, but refers to Lisa Benjamenta and Jakob's last view of her before she dies (as she disappears down the anamorphic corridor [fig. 70]).

[120] This image also recalls the snow-globe that appears at the end of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). Of course, *Citizen Kane* features one of the more famous uses of the McGuffin in Kane's sled, Rosebud, which is seen diffracted through the globe as it is being burnt.

if the snow is the fish food). Kraus looks up, the camera pans similarly, and snow falls from the round skylight into the inner chamber and onto the goldfish bowl. There is then an extremely long take of the bowl as shadows shift and flutter around it until the film ends and the credits appear. The very final image of the film, however, appears during the credits and shows a snowstorm in the in-between cathedral space.

What we see here, once again, is the confusion between inner and outer space since, although it appears that Jakob and Benjamenta have left the Institute, the snow storm is occurring both inside the fish tank and inside the room which houses the fish tank. Jakob and Herr Benjamenta have disappeared into the zero at the heart of the Institute with Kraus still in attendance. Kraus, unlike in the book, remains as the guardian of this zero, the zero of the zero.[121]

The film and the novel are both existential meditations on the impossibility of finding meaning in life and of the necessary but unimportant centre (which is, as we know, both the centre and not the centre) that allows the system to exist. *Institute Benjamenta* shows life as a system of arbitrary rules, aggressively enforced, without which life could not exist. These rules are imbued with a strong sexual overtone since sexuality is that which guarantees the continued existence of the system. As in Kafka, where the law is overtly sexualised, here the system of control is in itself sexual. The Institute Benjamenta only exists because of its rules and those rules are meaningless except as that which guarantees the existence of the Institute. In this way, it is possible, then, to finally understand the motto of the University of Kent at Canterbury (the

[121] More prosaically the snowstorm refers to Robert Walser's own death in such a storm while out on a walk on Christmas Day 1956: "the forensic photograph shows him face-up on the snow with one arm flung out, his eyes half-open in a frigid, unquiet slumber" (Buchan, 1998, p. 15).

institution whose rules govern this particular piece of writing):

Cui servire regnare est

This aphorism comes from the Book of Common prayer and is translated by Cranmer as "Whose service is perfect freedom" (Martin, 1990, p. 36).[122] This may stand as the rule of the *Institute*.

6.12 Institutions *In Absentia*

In response to a commission from a Channel 4 series of "Sound on Film", the Quay Brothers collaborated with one of the pioneers of electronic music in the 20th century, Karlheinz Stockhausen, to produce *In Absentia*, a 20 minute film, in 2000 (Aita, 2001, internet). An imagined recreation of a mental patient's attempts to write a letter to her husband, the Quays here most clearly show the way in which institutional control is both external and internal and that it is impossible to tell reality from illusion.

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[122] Graham Martin's book on the history of the University of Kent also contains hints of the sexual currents that seem to naturally inhabit any learning institution. In the first chapter, entitled "Prehistory", there is a photograph of "Miss M. Prall", the Secretary to the Registrar. The caption reads: "A few years later she became his [the Registrar, Mr E. Fox] wife as well, and managed with great skill the traditionally difficult business of combining the two functions" (Martin, 1990, p. 27). In the next chapter, "The Academic Plan", a photograph shows five elderly and august scholars and a young woman dressed in a rather dashing velvet suit. The frail Dr Maddison is an honorary graduate, while his son, Raymond, is a "long-serving and valued member of the University". The woman is Raymond's wife and "is one of our graduates" (Martin, 1990, p. 57). Considering the University's own rules against students of the opposite sex occupying each other's rooms at night, at least until the 1970s (Martin, 1990, p. 115), one can only presume that these rules may have been broken by some of the rule makers themselves. It may also be relevant to mention here that Martin, himself the Deputy Vice-Chancellor until 1981, died before the book, titled *From Vision to Reality*, could be finished. It is perhaps no coincidence that he died in the middle of winter.

The film was inspired by Emma Hauck, born in Ellwangen in 1878, who was diagnosed as suffering from "dementia praecox", a generalised description of psychotic behaviour, and died in an asylum in Wiesloch in 1928. Hauck came to the Quays' attention when some of her letters to her husband were exhibited in the *Beyond Reason: Art and Psychosis* exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 1996.[123] It is a moot point whether Hauck's letters can be considered as "artworks", consisting as they do of pages covered in almost illegible overlapping, repetitive sentences imploring her husband to come and fetch her, but the letters are deeply sad and their sense of trapped desperation is palpable (for reproductions, see *Beyond Reason*, 1996, pp. 93-95).

In Absentia, the title playing both on the absence of the husband and of Hauck's reason, shows Hauck in her room, repetitively twitching in pixillated fashion as she grips a lead pencil and writes a letter. This action is seen in extreme close up and the actress's face (Marlene Kaminsky) is never shown. Two animated puppets appear in the film, one seen only from below as its legs swing back and forth as it sits on a balcony, and the other, a horned and hooved mannequin, shot in colour (the rest of the film is black and white) and existing in a dusty room, speared by light. The first puppet appears to be a symbol of mechanical waiting while the second is a metaphorical representation of Emma Hauck's mind. This puppet is as trapped inside Hauck's skull as she is in the asylum. The actions of each mirror the other.

Emma imagines that a man's hands are embracing her as she writes the letter and sharpens her pencil, but it is clear

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[123] Hauck's letters form part of the Prinzhorn collection, a set of artworks by the patients of the Psychiatric Clinic at Heidelberg assembled by the psychiatrist, Hans Prinzhorn. The history of the collection is sketched out in Bettina Brand-Claussen's "The Collection of Works of Art in the Psychiatric Clinic, Heidelberg – from the Beginnings until 1945" (*Beyond Reason*, 1996, pp. 7-23).

that this is only her own hand and that while she appears to be in the grip of some other power, she is really only in her own hands. As she finishes the letter, she puts it into an envelope and posts it through a hole in her cupboard. The camera pans down to show piles of similar letters under the cupboard and we realise that the letter is just another in a potentially infinite number beseeching, "Herzensschatzi komm" ("Sweetheart come"). She opens a drawer and removes two more pencils from a seemingly inexhaustible pile while outside her room a man walks up and down the corridor and slips two pencils under her door. Is the man her guard or her husband? Is he her own mind patrolling itself? All these possibilities are true, but the only sweetheart that will come for Emma Hauck is death. Death is the only way to leave the institution.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

> The area of disavowal ("I know very well but all the same"), the last-ditch hope and defence of the Ego, is introduced everywhere by the mechanism of language. (Kristeva, 1990, p. 225).

Disavowal allows the thinking of two contradictory thoughts simultaneously. I have argued in this thesis that both meaning and fetish take disavowal as their fundamental structure. Thus an essential fetishism both constitutes meaning and undermines it by denying the logical existence of non-coincidence. It is this simultaneous oscillation that Derrida calls a "general fetishism" where "the economy of the fetish is more powerful than that of the truth – decidable – of the thing itself or than a deciding discourse of castration (*pro aut contra*). The fetish is not opposable" (1986b, p. 227). This then allows us to imagine a different economy of thought, one beyond the phallogocentric universe of truth and falsity.

In this thesis I have mapped out various histories of the term "fetishism". I have considered its use in anthropology, Marxism and psychoanalysis. I have also incorporated a philosophical approach to fetishism via Hegel and Derrida which argues that disavowal is a way of moving beyond conventional thinking and into something new. This, in many ways, is the project of deconstruction. Gayatri Spivak writes:

> Deconstruction seems to offer a way out of the closure of knowledge. By inaugurating the open-ended indefiniteness of textuality – by thus "placing in the abyss" (*mettre en abîme*), as the French expression would literally have it – it shows us the lure of the abyss as freedom. The fall into the abyss of deconstruction inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom. (1974, p. lxxvii)

This intoxication and terror has marked the writing of this thesis in ways that are difficult to express. However, there is a sense that the texts that I have chosen to

discuss here – those produced by Švankmajer, Kafka, the Quays as well as many of the theoretical texts – perform this "placing in the abyss" which I have tried to convey here. Of course, as Spivak also writes, "as she deconstructs, all protestations to the contrary, the critic necessarily assumes that she at least, and for the time being, means what she says" (p. lxxvii). Within the space of disavowal it is clear that the critic both does and does not mean what she says.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty I have encountered in this thesis is a feeling of nihilistic despair. Both in the face of works before which my own meager writing seems laughable and in the face of what Žižek calls the "massive, oppressive material presence" (1992, p. 7), the third object, which I discuss towards the end of the thesis as being embodied by the institution. This institution is allied with the Other and with death.

This despair, however, is still caught in the simple fetishism of truth and falsity. In the space of the economy of the generalised fetish, this difference is no longer important, and the sense of a future opens up. This possibility of hope is also contained within the texts I have analysed. It is their existence beyond my own thinking, and to which that thought must respond, that provides a way out of nihilism. J. Hillis Miller writes:

> A work of literature is always in one way or another or in many ways at once an act of survival, of living on after someone's or something's death. Death is the displaced name of the wholly other, but only one name, no more adequate or "literal" than any other. (2001, p. 72)

An encounter with fetishism is always, at the beginning, an encounter with this "wholly other" since fetishism is premised on a trauma, on the experience of that which is not the self and an understanding that death threatens the

self. It is the process of disavowal that allows one to traverse this impossible situation, to move beyond death.

Kafka's fetishisation of writing allows him to both represent that fetishisation and to enact it, just as Švankmajer's and the Quays' representation of animated objects is itself an animated object. It is in this self-reflexivity, in this short-circuit, that disavowal heralds a new economy of the general fetish.

Appendix I

Inaccessible Films of the Brothers Quay

Many of the early films of the Brothers Quay are either lost or unavailable for viewing. In this appendix, I give an account of as many of these films as possible based on secondary sources. While this section can be read in terms of the theoretical work of this thesis it is perhaps best left here as a record rather than as an integral part of the preceding work.

In Hammond's filmography of the Quays he lists three early student films, *Der Loop Der Loop*, *Il Duetto* and *Palais en Flammes*, as "Now lost" (1987, p. 60) while five other films, *Punch and Judy: Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy* (1980), *Ein Brudermoord* (1981), *The Eternal Day of Michel de Ghelderode 1898-1962* (1981), *Igor – The Paris Years Chez Pleyel* (1983) and *Leoš Janáček: Intimate Excursions* (1983) are not accessible at this time (Hammond provides brief descriptions of these films and some stills (1987, pp. 61-63)). There are, however, accounts of some of these films in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* and it appears that a copy of *Der Loop Der Loop* does exist in the archives of the University of the Arts in Philadelphia (which now incorporates the Quays' alma mater, the Philadelphia College of Art) (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 6).[124]

Der Loop Der Loop (1969?)

Tomlinson's account of this film (and of the Quays) consists of a series of paragraphs, each entitled "Clue" which seems to sum up the way in which the Quays are often

[124] See also the anonymous letter explaining that these early films (*Il Duetto*, *Palais en Flamme* and *Der Loop Der Loop*) were destroyed by an unexpected flood while being stored on the Koninck Studio premises in London (Hammond, 1987, pp. 66-67). For more details on the Quays' experiences at the Philadelphia College of Art, especially their discovery of Polish graphic art and their exploration of the museum of the Philadelphia College of Physicians, the Mütter Museum, see Tomlinson (2001, pp. 6-12).

discussed in academic articles. There films are considered as metonyms for the Brothers themselves and it is hoped that in their biography lurks some explanation or key to the films. Of course, the films then are used as clues to understand the Brothers and we are happily in the loop once again (we could call this the "auteur loop").

Tomlinson calls on fellow classmates of the PCA to testify to their increasingly "hermetic, obscure personas" and Marvin Mattelson comments that the Quays "really got into being 'weird' as a way of self-identification" (quoted in Tomlinson, 2001, p. 7). It is tempting to read their films in a similar, reductive way: as merely stylised and deliberate incarnations of the "weird". This charge of superficiality, however, while always a possible antagonistic reading, is one that the Quays make an overt part of their practice, which places the difference between surface and interior at the centre of the problematic that their films explore. The paradox of having a centre that explicitly problematises the possibility of such a centre is, of course, a necessary conundrum.

While studying illustration at the PCA (with Stephen changing to major in photography and film in their second year) they made their first films and the Quays write later:

> We shot a lot of live-action fragments and attempted some crude multi-plane collage cut-out (like *Der Loop Der Loop*) over sheets of glass in our room...But nothing special other than a fierce intuition that we really wanted to do film...Being trained in illustration and graphics naturally set us up as to taking the next step into animation, but we were equally galvanized by live-action. The only *real* courses we took would be watching other films and learning and making (even to this day) a lot of stupid mistakes. (Letter (1997) to Tomlinson, 2001, p. 14: ellipses in original)

According to Tomlinson *Der Loop Der Loop* was made at the Royal College of Art in London and was their "first

completed sound animation collaboration" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 14). Shot on a borrowed Bolex camera in their room, the film is described as follows:

> *Der Loop Der Loop* is the tale of a circus trick gone awry. We watch as two trapeze artists perform a series of stunts. "BEHOLD — CASTI-PIANI, THE MOST REMARKABLE TRAPEZE DUET," the ringmaster says (via calligraphic intertitles, silent-film style), "WILL NOW PERFORM FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HISTORY THE SPECTACULAR NEVER-TO-HAVE-BEEN-PERFORMED-BEFORE QUADRUPLE SOMERSAULT…" This feat ends absurdly as the woman grabs the man's legs, which break off, sending her plummeting in slow-motion to the floor below, where she lands, as a tumbler cartwheels over her. "AND THERE YOU HAVE IT." Other collaged figures populate this circus setting — odd musicians and what I take to be a ticket taker, who foreshadows the climax by shaking off his hand into the ticket box. (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 15)

This description prefigures the structure of their most famous film, *The Street of Crocodiles*, with the action framed by the payment of a bodily part (a hand in *Der Loop Der Loop*, spittle in *Street of Crocodiles*) and, as Tomlinson points out, establishes their predilection for the outmoded imagery of the 19th century and a fascination for intricate calligraphy, as well as introducing elements of the carnivalesque, with its overtones of violence, death, and - literally in the case of *Der Loop* - revolution. The motif of the circus performance reappears in their movement from two-dimensional cut-out animation to puppet animation, and also in their film *Punch and Judy: Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy* (1980) which is described by Hammond as a "documentary *homage* to the Punchman Giovanni Piccini, with excerpts from Harrison Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy*" (Hammond, 1987, p. 61). This was preceded by *Nocturna Artificiala* in 1979, which was thought to have been lost (Hammond, 1987, pp. 66-67), but has now been rediscovered and will be discussed in detail later.

Ein Brudermord **(1981)**

This adaptation of Kafka's short story, produced with financing from the Greater London Arts Association and the West German embassy, is again not accessible, but a review describes the story of the film thus:

> One night about nine o'clock, Schmar takes up his position with a knife at the corner where Wese, his intended victim, will turn from the street where he works into the street where he lives. Schmar passes the time whetting his knife and practising his thrust, observed by a neighbour, Pallas, who does nothing to prevent the crime. Mrs. Wese looks out for her husband, who is working uncommonly late, but at last the sound of a door bell announces his exit into the street. At the corner, he pauses to contemplate the night sky, then unknowingly advances to meet Schmar's knife. Exultant, triumphant, Schmar stabs his victim to death, then throws away his weapon, experiencing disappointment even in this ecstasy. (Combs, 1986, p. 219)

In his analysis of the film, Combs argues that the puppet film is particularly suited to representations of Kafka for four reasons. First he claims that the form allows metaphors to come to "startlingly literal life"; second, that puppetry, "a world of arbitrary bits and pieces where the tawdry, the pathetic, the strange and the intimidating freely intermingle", allows the expression of an "endless, impenetrable, infernal bureaucracy"; third, that the "topsy-turvy business of animating that which is clearly not animate" negatively echoes the universe of Kafka's novels in which the "animate is being made inanimate"; and finally, that Kafka's alienated position as a Jewish writer of German in Prague is akin to puppeteers who "are bound to work in a foreign element" while the puppeteer is himself "inevitably a foreign element, the practitioner of an exile's cinema" (Combs, 1986, p. 219). This last point refers quite clearly to Deleuze and Guattari's claim that Kafka was a writer of "minor literature" and it may be

useful to consider the films of the Quays as a "minor cinema".[125]

Ein Brudermord evidently has only one place of action, the street-corner, and their use of unsettling camera and stage movement in their later films is prefigured here. Combs explains that "the corner exists in malignant isolation, everything hinges here (at one point, instead of a camera movement, the set pivots to reveal another view" (Combs, 1986, p. 219). In his description of the film, Combs notes that the Quays have stripped away much of Kafka's story and have only retained the barest details of the murder narrative. Combs reads the film as a commentary on Kafka's self-loathing or, rather, self-dissatisfaction, and sees the film as a:

> compacted thought-story of a man who has to kill himself in order to be himself. The "brother murder" is the slaying of Kafka the insurance company clerk (Wese, "the industrious night-worker" who has a wife and a normal family life waiting for him) by the Kafka who longed for all these things but saw his own commitment to his art as being ineluctably, even self-destructively, opposed to them. (Combs, 1986, p.

[125] "The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation. We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 18). Deleuze and Guattari's third characteristic is usefully explained a little earlier: minor literature "is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of scepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility" (1986, p. 17). The films of a minor cinema would involve a certain "deterritorialization of language" and this can be seen quite literally in the Quays' use of numerous languages in their films, many of which they themselves do not speak or understand, and also in the use of a peculiar grammar of film, one based around the close-up and the unexpected shift in focus. In their concern with the lone figure in an uncanny landscape we might recognise a "connection of the individual to political immediacy", while their fantastic and marginal animated world certainly seems to suggest "another possible community" both in the fictional realm and in the audience that is interested in viewing their films.

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It also seems unavoidable to read the film as a half-joking comment by the twin Brothers Quay on their own working relationship: it is only in the death of the other that the one will find freedom. However, as we understand from Edgar Allan Poe's *William Wilson*, by destroying one's twin, whether evil or not, one necessarily destroys oneself.

The Eternal Day of Michel De Ghelderode 1898-1962 **(1981)**

In the first line of Roger Noake's description of another inaccessible Quay film (the first in a series of four "documentaries" or biopics), we can see already some of the Quay's preoccupations at work: the disjunction of the past and the present; the author-as-loner; the author-as-exile; the author-as-voyeur:

> Maps of fifteenth-century Flanders and present-day Belgium are juxtaposed, while the voice of Michel De Ghelderode announces that he is not a Belgian writer but a man who writes in a room. An eye appears at a peep-hole, and the first of six extracts adapted from Ghelderode's work begins. (Noake, 1986, p. 221)[126]

[126] The rest of Noake's summary is as follows: "The eccentric cavalier from the play *Cavalier Bizarre* rides through sinister scenery of windmills and gibbets; another figure in a cart or tumbril spins past, trembling in terror as it is transported into a landscape of towering pylons and gloomy cathedral façades. The peep-hole is suddenly closed and a curtain drawn by a clown. The clown puts on a half-mask and the second extract, from *La Mort du Docteur Faust* is played out. Faust is presented as a figure marooned outside time: he cannot enter history and thus he can only passively observe the world (which is represented by a spinning top). Finally, he is seen looking in through a window at the world of dead but immortal subjects. Michel de Ghelderode is shown entering a theatre; he states that he is the central masked figure of his plays and introduces (in the third extract) the explorer Christopher Columbus, who sits beneath a huge hat made of newspapers, blowing bubbles while he is interviewed by a reporter. In his study, Ghelderode pronounces on the ritualistic nature of theatre and the importance of carnival and procession: images from Bosch and Ensor illustrate the visual roots of his work. In the fourth extract, from *Hop, Signor!*, two dwarfs on stilts and crutches stage a mock fight while Signor Juréal bemoans his crumbling body; the Executioner (who takes the form of a Swiss army knife) extols the virtues of hanging. Ghelderode arrives at the puppet theatre of Toon in Brussels, for which he wrote five marionette plays, and talks to the puppeteers. In the fifth extract, from *Fastes d'Enfer* (*Chronicles of Hell*), Jan In

Noake carries on to argue that the playwright Ghelderode "had turned to the marvellous rather than the fantastic" (Noake, 1986, p. 221), and if this is understood within Todorov's schema it means that Ghelderode, and by extension this film of the Quays, is more concerned with the supernatural than with the ambiguity between the actual and the magical and is therefore interested in "alchemy and the visionary images of Flemish painting" rather than the "area of the repressed unconscious" (1986, p. 221). This also introduces the Freudian notion of the uncanny as the return of that which has been repressed. It is, however, difficult to see the coherence of Noake's analysis; he observes on an unrelated note that "the omnipresent voice of the teller of dark tales is paralleled in animation by the ever-present hand of the artist/manipulator" (1986, p. 221). This is indeed another feature of the Quays' work, a foregrounding of the process of animation itself, but this must surely be understood as the instance of Todorov's uncanny in which the apparently magical is revealed to be an explainable trick.

Noake emphasises the subtitle to the film, "Synthesis, Mask, Spectacle", commenting particularly on the "function and power of the mask" which he sees as imparting a possibility of "endless ritual" to its wearer (1986, p. 221). He later describes Ghelderode in archive material from a documentary for Radio Télévision Belge as having an "expressionless face resembling a mask from a Noh play" and "determinedly hiding himself away at the centre of his own fiction" (1986, p. 221). The figure of the mask lends

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Eremo, Bishop of Lapideopolis, who has been poisoned by his own priests, stands over his empty coffin unable truly to die. He struggles with and overpowers one priest, and his mother lays him finally to rest in his coffin, 'dead twice dead'. In the final extract, from *Masques Ostendais*, the characters from the previous extracts are reintroduced. Two figures with brooms sweep paper which the clown throws with fake jollity; a puppet is tossed in the air by the dwarfs. The puppet of the Grim Reamer informs us that 'We are living in an age lacking in the marvellous'." (Noake, 1986, p. 221).

itself both to the metaphor of the author-as-hidden-creator as well as to the broader theme of signification itself. The Quays use the mask more as a signifier of unreadability, of disguise and of the secret. Roland Barthes, in his discussion of Greta Garbo's face in *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933), writes that "the temptation of the absolute mask (the mask of antiquity, for instance) perhaps implies less the theme of the secret (as is the case with Italian half mask) than that of an archetype of the human face" (Barthes, 1993, p. 56). Note that in the Quay film a clown dons a "half-mask" (Noake, 1986, p. 221) and we can perhaps understand that while the whole or "absolute" mask asks the reader to take its signification as total, it is the half-mask which figuratively insists on another meaning beneath the obvious sign. This second meaning is the process of signification itself. This is the secret hidden within the Quay films: the fact that they are structured as if they contain a secret.

Igor and *Leoš*[127]

Hammond only provides the barest of credits for *Igor – The Paris Years Chez Pleyel* (1983), as well as an unattributed quotation (presumably from Stravinsky, which may or may not be quoted in the film itself):

> Igor – you see…the pianolist sets *it* in motion through the foot pedals…The actual notes are cut out – of a paper roll – which passes over a "tracking bar", with corresponding holes…which are connected by an array of tubes to a pneumatic motor…which in turn operates the wooden fingers which press down the notes on the keyboard…the left hand lever operates the piano peddle and sustains the notes being played, while the right hand sets the speed and controls the phrasing of the music…rather like a conductor…and *so* the chain from the roll to music is completed… (Hammond, 1987, p. 62)

[127] Full summaries for both films are provided by Durgnat (1986, p. 189) and Strick (1986, p. 190).

We can see that the Quays concentrate on Stravinsky's explorations of the mechanical reproduction of music with the pianola in the 1910s and especially during the 1920s when he was based at the Pleyel music company in Paris and produced piano roll versions of much of his work.[128] The Quays own interest in illusion and outdated equipment seems to be echoed in this particular choice of subject matter.

The Brothers' interest in 19th and early 20th century music and a certain gothic pessimism continues with *Leoš Janáček: Intimate Excursions* (1983) and is based on Jaroslav Vogel's biography of Janáček featuring music from his operas *The Cunning Little Vixen*, *The Makropoulos Case* and *From the House of the Dead* (Hammond, 1987, p. 63). Once again, Hammond provides a slightly cryptic quotation from the libretto of *The Makropoulos Case*:

> *Marty* – It's a great mistake to live so long! Oh, if you only knew how easy life is for you! You are so close to life! You see some meaning in life! Life has some value for you! Fools, how happy you all are!…And it's due to the paltry chance that you will al die soon. You believe in mankind, love, virtue, progress. There's nothing more that you can want. (quoted in Hammond, 1986, p. 63)

[128] See "Igor Stravinsky and the Pianola" <http://www.pianola.org/pages/history/stravinsky.html> and Pleyel's own website: <http://www.pleyel.fr>.

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Darkness, Light, Darkness / Tma, světlo, tma (1989)

Flora (1989)

The Death of Stalinism in Bohemia / Konec stalinismu v Čechách (1990)

Food / Jídlo (1992)

Faust / Lekce Faust (1994)

Conspirators of Pleasure / Spiklenci slasti (1996)

Little Otik / Otesánek (2000)

Šílení / Lunacy (2005)

Filmography: Stephen and Timothy Quay

Il Duetto (unknown)

Palais en Flammes (unknown)

Der Loop der Loop (c. 1969)

Nocturna Artificialia (1979)

Punch & Judy: Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy (1980)

Ein Brudermord (1981)

The Eterenal Day of Michel de Ghelderode 1898-1962 (1981)

Igor – the Paris years chez Pleyel (1982)

Leos Janáček: Intimate Excursions (1983)

The Cabinet of Jan Švankmajer – Prague's Alchemist of Film (1984)

Little Songs of the Chief Officer of Hunar Louse, or This Unnameable Little Broom (1985)

Street of Crocodiles (1986)

Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies (1988)

Stille Nacht I: Dramolet (1988)

Ex Voto (1989)

The Comb – From the Museums of Sleep (1990)

De Artificiali Perspectiva – Anamorphosis (1990)

The Calligrapher I-III, Stille Nacht II: Are We Still Married? (1991)

Look What the Cat Drug In, Stille Nacht III: Tales From the Vienna Woods (1992)

Stille Nacht IV: Can't Go Wrong Without You (1993)

Institute Benjamenta (1995)

In Absentia (2000)

The Sandman (2000)

Phantom Museum: Random Forays into the Vaults of Sir Henry Wellcome's Medical Collection (2003)

The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes (2005)