Entering the Grotto of the Biomechanical Puppeteer:
Exploring the Grotesque in Stop motion Puppetry

by

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the significance of stop motion puppetry as an artistic device that enables illustrators to explore the notion of the 'grotesque'. Mikhail Bakhtin and Wolfgang Kayser's theorisation of the grotesque provides the foundation for my analysis of the manifestation of the grotesque in the puppets and stop motion techniques utilised in Jan Švankmajer's *Something from Alice* (1988) and a selected film from my own work entitled *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). A comparative study of these two films demonstrate that stop motion puppetry is an apt medium for facilitating and exploring forms of the grotesque.

Abstrak

Die klem in hierdie tesis val op die belangrikheid van stop-aksie poppespel as 'n artistieke toestel wat kunstenaars kan gebruik om idees van die groteske weer te gee deur die gebruik van objekte sowel as die destruktiewe aard van die animasie proses. Mikhail Bakthin en Wolfang Kayser se idees rondom the groteske, vestig die grondslag vir die studie, om karaktereienskappe van die groteske te ontbloot in die poppe en metodes wat gebruik is in Jan Švankmajer se film *Something from Alice* (1988), sowel as 'n geselekteerde film van my eie werk genaamd *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). 'n Vergelykende studie, weerspieël dat groteske karakteruitbeelding verkry kan word deur sekere materiale te gebruik om poppe-liggame te skep. Die studie ontul verder dat die groteske geïdentifiseer kan word in die animasie proses waarin die verwronging en afbreking van objekte, tyd, spasie en beweging plaasvind.

Acknowledgement

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

> To speak of a puppet with most men and women is to cause them to giggle. They
> think at once of the wires; they think of the stiff hands and the jerky movements;
> they tell me it is "a funny little doll". But … these puppets … are the descendants of
> a great and noble family of images, images which were indeed made "in the likeness
> of god[s]. (E. Gordon Craig cited in Nelson 2001:24)

What is it about the puppet's gaze that induces this sudden uneasiness? It is exactly this question I asked myself upon my first encounter with an animated puppet. A few years ago (2010) I had the fortunate opportunity to attend a puppetry workshop by *Handspring Puppet Company* in Kalk Bay, Cape Town. In an introduction to the basic manipulation of a rod puppet,[1] Adrian Kohler[2] held up one of his wooden puppets and with an effortless movement from his wrist the puppet blankly looked across the faces in the studio, as if he was confused by our presence there. I too first giggled, but then a feeling of awkwardness arose that made me feel unwelcome in his company. What lead me to attend this workshop was yet another encounter with a puppet that captivated my attention by total chance: During my fourth year studies as a Visual Communication design student I started experimenting with simple animation techniques as a medium for illustration. Upon browsing numerous animated videos on *YouTube* in exploration for different techniques and styles, one video evoked a sudden emotional response from me that was incomprehensible. It was a simple shadow puppetry play titled *Twice* (2009) that acted as a pilot for the short film, *Dreams from the Woods* (2012).[3] What struck me most was how the simplistic movements of the paper puppets could narrate a complex tragic tale. This mysterious power that the puppet seems to possess over its beholder have bemused both the audience and the puppeteer from its early origin as idol to its contemporary leap to the digital realm.   The theoretical and practical work of the English modernist theatre practitioner, Edward Cordon Craig, provides a good introduction to this mystical power that the puppet bestows.

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[1] A rod puppet is a type of theatre puppet held up by wooden or steel rod(s) that supports the weight and controls the movement(s) of the puppet.
[2] Adrian Kohler is the master puppet-designer and sculptor of the *Handspring Puppet Company*, he is also one of the founding members (together with Basil Jones) of the company.
[3] The film *Dreams from the Woods* (2013) was originally titled *Drömmar från skogen* (Swedish).

Not only was Craig an admirable theatre practitioner, but he was also a successful working actor, director and scenic designer. Craig too was inspired by the impression of puppets; to him the puppet is superior to the actor because it does not compete for life and thus does not suffer from egoism. Craig argues in this regard that "the actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure – the Über-marionette we may call him, until he has won for himself a better name" (1911:81). But what is this Über-marionette? In his book *On the Art of Theatre,* Craig (1911:81-85) argues that the modern puppet has become a lowly comedian, a reproach to the symbolic creature it once was, and today it appears as the last reminiscence of a once noble art from the past. Craig's determination to capture "pure emotion" in his work might justify his longing for the regain of the puppet's "noble artificiality" (1911:81). As he argues:

> [We] must remake these images [puppetry] … its ideal will not be the flesh and blood but rather the body in trance – it will aim to clothe itself with a death-like beauty while exhaling a living spirit (Craig 1911:84-85).

The above passage, if removed from its scholarly context, may very well fit the words of some sorcerer from a fantasy novel, calling upon the transcendental forces of the underworld. Yet, these are the words of a modernist theatre practitioner pursuing spiritual stimulation through the means of puppetry. What exactly is this odd element that we as audience members find so fascinating in the performance of life? Is there perhaps some psychological reason, or early origin for this? Victoria Nelson, in *The Secret Life of Puppets* (2001) offers a convincing evaluation on primordial religious impulses and how, since the Enlightenment, the scientific materialism of secular cultures has apparently repressed our spiritual natures. In her book she argues that our predisposition for the supernatural, our animist beliefs, have been repressed and dislocated from their religious origin, resulting in an rise of dark imaginings in popular culture. In her assessment she draws on paradigms of gothic stories, fantastic literature and horror films as examples of new secular residences of the modern-day religious compulsion. It is not strange that we as audience members will willingly suspend our disbelief and believe in the life of the puppet. Basil Jones,[4] in his essay *Puppetry and Authorship* (2009), supports this notion by stating that "there is a powerful, ancient, psychic allure to stepping into a darkened theatre and being invited to believe again" (2009:225).

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[4] Basil Jones is a co-founder of the *Handspring Puppet Company* and he was the producer of both internationally acclaimed productions *Tall Horse* and *War Horse* (in collaboration with the National theatre of London) from 2002-2007.

This animist appeal that Nelson and Jones support might be the answer to my question, but does it apply to all forms of puppetry? Puppetry had been utilised as early as 3000 BC (Blumenthal 2005:5), it has since mutated into various types of puppets and disciplines. However, it remains fascinating that the greater body of performing puppets have largely inherited the ability to exercise our imaginations in a way to allow us to believe in the supernatural (even if it is just for a brief moment). Nevertheless, there is one puppet that has escaped the theatre, to join an unalike and transformative variety of reality – this is the stop motion puppet. This migration of puppets from theatre (live performance) to film marks an important change in the genealogy of puppetry. With the emergence of motion-capture technology arose the recorded performance of filmic devices, thus setting aside the parameters of theatre (which is tied and simultaneously dependent on the physical and logical laws of the realm in which its audience exists) in exchange for a novel, retrospective representation of reality. Thus the puppet residing in this newly discovered realm of the film world calls for a different ontological perspective on its prolonged ancestry of animated figurines concerning human and animal simulacrum. In the filmic genre the puppet's existence no longer relies on the skilled hand of the puppeteer, but on multifaceted performances that are facilitated by of the stop motion technique. The detachment from the manipulator's body results in an 'emancipatory' accomplishment for the puppet: it is no longer confined to the physical dimension of the stage and therefore it can walk without strings, its hands are no longer stiff, it has entered the otherworldly sphere of animation.

Presented with these abilities the puppet has become a seemly candidate to be included in fantasy (see, for example, *Labyrinth* 1986), science fiction (such as *Star Wars* 1977*)*, and horror films (*Childs Play* 1988). Puppets animated through the stop motion technique are not exclusive to fully animated films[5] such as *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993)*, Coraline* (2009) and *Fantastic Mr*. *Fox* (2009), but often perform beside human actors. There is a significant difference in the roles and dispositions of puppets existing alongside humans (and in juxtaposition with elements recognisable to our world view) to puppets existing in a complete fabricated (illustrated) world. Films in which puppets and humans are rendered to mutual entities, populating the world that we regard as 'truthful', often bares traces of an alienated world an a distortion of our ideas concerning 'reality'.

These are also evident characteristics of the grotesque, which is of particular importance to my thesis. In an attempt to define the nature of [T]he grotesque, Wolfgang Kayser writes: "the

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[5] I refer to fully animated films as films that are entirely created frame by frame.

grotesque is the estranged world … we are unable to orientate ourselves in the alienated world, because it is absurd" (1957:184-185). But from what point of view is this estranged world represented? Kayser argues that this problem leads us back to the creative process of the artist, as the "estranged world appears in the vision of the dreamer or daydreamer or in the twilight of the transitional moments" (1957:86). For Kayser, the artist is the "dreamer" who has the ability to transform existing things and objects into such an estranged world. This is clearly attested in the animated work of the surrealist Czech artist and filmmaker, Jan Švankmajer, who is the main focus of my theoretical investigation into grotesque stop motion puppetry. His vision of creating unexpected contexts through the alteration and animation of everyday objects and puppets indicates the artist's practice of the grotesque.

This thesis is thus an attempt to locate manifestations of the grotesque in stop motion films by exploring the grotesque bodies of puppets as works of art in themselves, the manifestation of an 'estranged world' in the creative process what I identify as grotesque puppetry. A second objective of this thesis is to expose stop motion puppetry as a digested practice of traditional puppetry by arguing that it is a representation of puppetry within the discipline of illustration.

While much is written about the stop motion animation regarding its origin and technical functioning, there is scant literature on its actual manifestation as a mode of grotesque expression. There is also a significant lack of information regarding the perception and roles of puppets in their transition from theatre to film. One of the most important sources is Victoria Nelson's *The Secret Life of Puppets* (2001), in which she explores the supernatural grotesque in Western culture, with a particular interest in what she identifies as fantastic film and literature. The book offers compelling subject matter on the history of human simulacra from late antiquity to their postmodern return in popular culture. In her book she explores the hidden intersections between inherent religious impulses and contemporary society and, as she explains, "we can locate our unacknowledged belief in the immortal soul by looking at the ways that human simulacra – puppets, cyborgs and robots – carry on their role as direct descendants of graven images in contemporary science fiction stories and films" (2001:viii).

Paul Zelevansky's article *Presence: The Touch of the Puppet* (2006) was another important source as it draws on the ideal of the puppet as model to investigate ideas about presence, play, animation, and belief (2006:263). To him, puppetry plays a significant role as theatrical device and it is deeply rooted in cross-cultural experiences that I consulted. Zelevansky shares Nelson's

4

notion of an 'inhering soul' that acts for and through a puppet, idol, toy, or effigy and that acts as a central component within all attempts to embody and mimic animate life. His discussion of puppetry as cross-cultural phenomenon sheds light on its metaphysical power through aesthetics and sensory manifestation. The article raises questions about the projection of life onto objects and puppetry's role for reflecting the transitional effects of reality and the imaginary.

Steve Tillis's investigation of the rise of digital technology and its influence on the creation of puppetry is also of importance, especially as it speaks about the transformation of tangible objects into mediated figures. In an essay *The Art of Puppetry in the Age of Media Production* (1999), Tillis attempts to theorise the role of the digital puppet as media figure through the study of such figures that have been used in films ranging from *Nightmare before Christmas* (1993) to *Men in Black* (1997).

Robert Vanderbeeken's investigation on how the photographic image can be remediated in other media is also relevant to my study as resonates with my investigation of stop motion films. In the article *Media art and the resurrection of an image: motion and sculpturing* (2009), Vanderbeeken draws on examples of media art that demonstrates how the introduction of a new setting in time and space can create extended photographic imagery. An evaluation of flipbooks by Volker Gerling is given as an example that vividly showcases this extension in time. A further analysis of the life-size sculptural installations in combination with miniature models of Hans Op de Beeck reveals how the viewer, when confronted with forms of spatial transformation and distortion, plays an active role in the revitalisation of a photographic image.

By drawing on such sources, my argument will unfold in the following order: Chapter One concerns the meaning of the notion of the 'grotesque'. An exploration of the shifting connotations of the term 'grotesque' over time, from its origin to its current use, reveals its complexity and multifaceted nature. This chapter's main focus will be on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the 'grotesque body' (1984:303). The notion of the exchange between body and earth and the unfinished metamorphosis of existence, as proposed by Bakhtin, will create an important theme that runs through the thesis. This chapter also provides a brief overview of the history of the puppet as an 'otherworldly' object, which will shed light on the grotesque nature of animated objects that function as an expression of human life. The first aim of this chapter is to show how the grotesque has been understood historically, and how this understanding has changed and developed over time. The second aim is to show how the relationship between human and object

5

has developed in terms of puppetry.

In Chapter Two, I focus on stop motion puppetry as a contemporary example of secular puppetry. A brief historic overview of the use of stop motion puppets in motion picture filmmaking provides insightful information on a contemporary interpretation of fictional existences. Fantasy filmmaking pioneers who employed the stop motion technique to create visual illusions of 'supernatural' life in their work include Ladislas Starewitch, Alexander Ptushko and Jiri Trinka. A brief discussion of their work will provide an understanding of the origin and the nature of the stop motion technique. The central discussion of this chapter explores how the grotesque can be manifested in stop motion puppets as objects of human and animal simulacra.[6]

The animated work of Czech filmmaker Jan Švankmajer, is fundamental to this argument. Švankmajer's method of finding new and unexpected contexts and situations for objects that might otherwise be mistaken for cultural waste, forms the foundational logic of this artist's grotesque practice of animation. It is not in the scope of this study to discuss the entire body of Švankmajer's filmography, but I will refer to some of his films to support related arguments. For the purposes of this study I will focus specifically on what I identify as the use of grotesque objects in Švankmajer's *Something from Alice* (1988) and one of my own films entitled *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). In Chapter Two, a comparative study between puppets from these two films provides an insightful realisation about the unique ontology of grotesque stop motion puppets. By analysing the make-up and construction of the puppet bodies that are used in these films, I aim to show how the grotesque is manifested in the opposing anatomical arrangement of objects. Both films provide sufficient aesthetic material concerning the grotesque metamorphosis of inanimate objects into animate entities. The interchange between tangible objects supports Bakhtin's (1984:24) notion of the grotesque body as an unfinished metamorphosis of death and birth, growth and becoming, which is a formative trait of the grotesque.

Chapter Three will concentrate on the technical aspect of the stop motion medium and the multiple deconstructive processes the animator draws on to represent biological life through inanimate objects. The logic of this chapter is largely based on Wolfgang Kayser's (1957:184-187) theory of the grotesque and the motivation behind creating grotesque art, namely: the fusion

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[6] 'Simulacrum' is a term that is generally used to describe something that replaces reality with its representation. "The simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none" (Ecclesiates, cited in Baudrillard 1994:1).

of separate realms, the abolition of the law of statics, the loss of identity, the distortion of natural size and shape, the suspension of the categorisation of objects, the destruction of personality, and the fragmentation of the historical order (cited in Thompson 1972:18). As this chapter will demonstrate, Kayser's multifaceted definition of grotesque art can be identified in the animation processes of both *Something from Alice* (1988*)* and my own film *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). In both stop motion films the combined effort of the filmmaker, puppeteer, animator and live-actor contribute to the believability of a character's existence.   In this chapter I shall specifically focus on the use of grotesque characterisation, as is exemplified in the character of the White Rabbit in *Something from Alice* (1988) and Fred Visser in *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011).   Finally, my conclusion will assimilate these various ideas by reflecting on different means of grotesque manifestations in stop motion puppetry.

7

CHAPTER 1

THE GROTESQUE BODY

1.1 The notion of the 'Grotesque'

The concept of the 'grotesque' is difficult to grasp without understanding the origin and complex meanings of the term itself. Although the precise term is relatively new, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, the concept of the 'grotesque' has other, wider manifestations. This chapter will explore how the term has accrued multifaceted connotations over time, from its origin to its current use.

The birth of the western notion of the grotesque can be located in a specific time and place in history. When Italian antiquarians evacuated the Roman emperor Nero's Domus Aurea outside Rome in 1480, they had to dig so far down to reach it that they called its rooms and corridors *grotte*, from *crypta*, a Latin word derived from the Greek meaning of 'cave' or 'hidden pit.' On the interior walls of the sunken palace they found murals depicting strange hybrid monsters of a style in vogue during the first century after Christ – a style Horace had mocked in *Ars Poetica* for its fantastic juxtapositions (of a horse's neck with a man's head and a woman's body with a fish's tail, for example) as "dreams of a sick person's mind" (cited in Nelson 2001:2). Some of these ancient decorations and ornaments were characterized by the intermingling of human, animal and vegetable themes and forms. This early Roman visual conceit, once unearthed from Nero's *grotte*, was taken up by late fifteenth-century Italian painters. The mode *alla grottesca* swept across Europe and the grotto itself became the centre point of every nobleman's garden. In French this was translated into *crotesque* as early as 1532, which became the form to be adopted in English where it was used until superseded by the term *grotesque* around 1640. A century after the *Domus Aurea* evacuations, the grotto or artificial cave had become nothing less than the "place of birth and death, passing away and rebirth, descent and resurrection" (Nelson 2001:2), a highly charged, microcosmic container of selected physical objects.

The term 'grotesque' was created to describe a specific style of visual art, soon became notable in other art forms as well. For example, it was adopted by literature as early as the sixteenth century, but only became customary in a literary context in the neoclassical eighteenth century. The term was mainly used to describe 'freakish' deviances from the desirable models of harmony, balance and proportion.

8

Today, the grotesque is commonly perceived not only as the depiction of seemingly 'obscene' oddities but rather, as Philip Thomson summarizes this historical phenomenon, "as a fundamentally ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites, and hence, in some of its forms at least, as an appropriate expression of the problematical nature of existence" (1972:11). According to Thompson, the concept is further complicated by overlapping modes and categories in relation to terms such as the 'absurd', the 'macabre', the 'bizarre', 'caricature', 'parody', 'satire', 'irony' and the 'comic'.   It is therefore impossible to use the term without being aware of the complexity that pervades its use and manifestation.

This complexity is also underscored on a theoretical level, and is important, at this stage of my thesis, to introduce two studies by significant theorists of the grotesque, namely: Wolfgang Kayser who is noted for his interpretation of grotesque imagery and Mikhail Bakhtin who provided an influential account of the grotesque body. Kayser and Bakhtin are both regarded as seminal theorists in the field of the grotesque, although they offer divergent conclusions on the nature of the concept.

1.2 Groteskology

1.2.1 Wolfgang Kayser: The Grotesque in Art and Literature

One of the most influential theorists on the grotesque is German critic Wolfgang Kayser. In his book *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1957), Kayser traces the historical development of the grotesque from its origin in the Italian Renaissance to the periods of Romanticism and nineteenth century realism. A great contribution to this particular study is his investigation on grotesque manifestations in modern forms of dream narration, surrealist painting and poetry. With a particular centre of interest in European literature and painting, Kayser finds the grotesque in the union of the horrific and the comic as he writes, the grotesque "appears to us in paradoxical guise … and it elicits from us paradoxical responses" (cited in Edwards & Graulund 2013:11).

The evolution of the grotesque is not central to Kayser's study, but he rather wishes to focus on the grotesque as an effective description of the act of mediation itself.   In an attempt to define the nature of the grotesque, Kayser writes that:

The word grotesque applies to three different realms – the creative process, the work of art itself and its reception – is significant and appropriate as an indication that it has the makings of a basic aesthetic category (Kayser 1957:180).

According to Kayser (1957:180), this threefold aspect may be characteristic to a work of art in general, but stands in direct contrast to all other forms of production, which are physically created, such as everyday household objects or mechanical designs. He values the grotesque as the manifestation of a unique reality that is both of and opposed to the world in which the viewer exists. The term can thus not be paralleled to a specific socio-historical context, for what is considered grotesque to an audience today might not have been thought to be grotesque by a fourteenth century audience. To him the form or function that the grotesque conveys is subject to its audience's expectations in a certain time and place (Edwards & Graulund 2013:12). Kayser uses the example of Inca statues that might be considered as grotesque by those who are unfamiliar with the culture of Incas, but "the medium through which some horror, anguish, or fear of the incomprehensible is expressed, is a familiar form that belongs to a perfectly intelligible frame of reference" (1957:181). This ignorant use of the term is problematic for Kayser (1957:181), as some grotesque elements in certain works are not properly appreciated and are based on essential misunderstandings of the concept.

Although Kayser (1957:181) maintains that the grotesque is only experienced in the act of reception, he agrees that it is possible that things (works of art) are regarded as grotesque even though there are no specific structures in place for calling them so. In attempt to define the structure of the grotesque Kayser argues that "the grotesque is the estranged world" (1957:184), or that which is experienced as estranged, so to speak. Albeit a structure without a structure, Kayser (1957:181-185) admits that there are certain specific forms and motifs, which are liable towards certain contents. In his assessment, Kayser recorded observations of repetitive subject matter that seem to substantiate important themes in grotesque works of art: Among them belong all "monstrosities", grotesque animal incarnations, the fusion of organic and mechanical elements, insanity and quasi-insanity[7] and the mechanical object brought to life (1957:181-185).[8] This formulation of the grotesque suggests that "the categories that apply to our world view become inapplicable" (Kayser 1957:185). It is specifically the transgressive nature of these

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[7] This implies something or somebody that is partly or almost insane (Oxford Dictionaries 2014).
[8] These themes comprise of various sub-categories and overlapping modes of the grotesque, which will be further discussed in Chapters Two and Three.

10

themes that, as this thesis will demonstrate, applies to the surreal puppetry films of Jan Švankmajer. Kayser explains this ambivalent and transgressive nature of the grotesque as:

> [T]he fusion of realms which we know to be separated, the abolition of the law of the statistics, the loss of identity, the distortion of "natural size and shape, the suspension of the category of objects, the destruction of personality, and the fragmentation of the historical order. (1957:185)

In the above passage he recognises the absurd in our inability to orientate ourselves in the alienated world and thus the grotesque emerges from a satiric world view (1957: 186-187). This criticism offers valuable assistance in analysing Mikhail Bakhtin's use of the term's connection with the carnivalesque through the inversion of reality by temporarily disrupting the hierarchy of a closed society. To Kayser, the grotesque can never be exclusively tragic, as tragedy also harbours the absurd and in return recalls laughter through satire. In the numerous works he has studied, two basic types of the grotesque can be isolated: "the 'fantastic' grotesque with its oneiric worlds and the radically 'satiric' grotesque with its play of masks" (Kayser 1957:186).

In regard to the creative process resulting in a grotesque work of art, Kayser points out that "the grotesque is a play with the absurd" (1957:187). He expands on this view by stating that the same "anti-structure" of the grotesque applies to the creative execution of an artwork (1957:187). The question remains, why do artists of the grotesque seek out and activate power of the incomprehensible? Kayser believes that regardless of the helplessness and terror inspired by that which is incomprehensible and 'dark', the artistic portrayal of this estrangement effects a secret liberation, and thus he explains his final understanding of the grotesque as "an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (1957:188).

1.2.2 Bakhtin and his Formulation of the Grotesque

Bakhtin focuses on the body as a subcategory of his theory of the grotesque, which he developed from the medieval literary genre of grotesque realism. The "material bodily value" (Bakhtin 1965:18) in grotesque realism is the principle Bakhtin refers to as the body's connection to its earthiness, which means that the body cannot forsake its union with the soil from which it endlessly springs. This process of directing everything in a downwards spiral towards the material realm of body and earth, with the related processes of digestion, defecation, copulation and conception, centres on an interest in the "lower stratum of the body" or, in Bakhtinian terms,

11

in forms of "degradation" (Bakhtin 1965:19). This continuous exchange between body and earth results in an "unfinished metamorphosis of death and birth, growth and becoming" (Bakhtin 1965:24). This is a formative trait of the grotesque and an infinite source of festivity, according to Bakhtin. This festive spirit with which Bakhtin honours the grotesque body is a key point to be made in this study and cannot be overstated. The ambivalence and embodying fluctuation of the grotesque image is the opposite of the "classic images of the finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development" (Bakhtin 1965: 25).

To understand Bakhtin's view of the grotesque, it is important to look at certain changes that occurred in the societies that he was investigating and writing about. During the Renaissance, classical aesthetics eventually replaced medieval aesthetics. Emphasis shifted towards the ideal body as a complete, fixed and pure entity, removed from its peripheral world and the biological successions of the human body. In this idealistic representation of the body, any trace of the body's unfinished nature and its bodily disarray is shielded from view (Bakhtin 1965:29). Through the scope of classical aesthetics, the grotesque body is regarded as monstrous and horrid. According to Bakhtin, this change is a regressive disintegration of "the positive pole of grotesque realism" (1965:53), and calls for a restoring of the lost dynamism of folk culture, which "brought the world close to man, gave it a bodily form, and established a link through the body and bodily life" (Bakhtin 1965:35-39). For Bakhtin, the essential idea of the grotesque remains monstrous, which (as Kayser also argues) is a vestige of the transformation that the grotesque underwent in the Romantic era. The Romantic grotesque, manifested by its 'vivid sense of isolation' (Bakhtin 1965: 37), reduces the fundamental element of laughter to irony and sarcasm, thus eliminating its regenerative qualities. If terror is undefeatable through laughter, the Romantic grotesque exists in a disturbing and alien world, spawned from the moralistic "abstract and spiritual mastery pursued by Romanticism" (Bakhtin 1965:36-39). According to Bakhtin, it is this same moralistic pursuit that has since become a characteristic of the modern grotesque. Bakhtin argues that the modern grotesque image is not only deprived of the body as a source of power and rebirth, but also of laughter as its main defence against the fear of existence.

1.3 The Grotesque Bodies of Puppets and Idols

The puppet is essentially and foremost an object. Puppetry takes many forms, but they all share the process of animating inanimate objects. It consists of material elements that are tangible to our sensory perception and, like any man-made object; it serves as a functional tool for human society. Although most puppetry involves storytelling, its main use since the earliest times has

12

been to animate and communicate the ideas and needs of human societies.

Bakhtin explains that the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, the lowering of all that is abstract, holy, noble, and ideal to the material level. A brief overview of the history of the puppet as an 'otherworldly'[9] object may shed some light on the grotesque nature of puppetry in which animated objects are used to express the uncertainties of human existence. It is, however, not in the scope of this thesis to reveal a detailed study of the origin and history of puppets, but rather to briefly explore the phenomenon of grotesque realism in puppetry, from its earliest practices in religion to its use in contemporary stop motion fantasy films.

While the commonly accepted definition of a puppet is that of an object manipulated by someone, the history and meaning of puppets is in fact a long and varied one. Puppetry is used in almost all cultures as forms of entertainment, ceremonial rituals and celebrations. Xenophon, the Greek historian, mentioned them as early as 500 BC in such written works as *The Symposium* (Jowett 1956). This can further be validated by an Elizabethan word for puppet, 'mammet', which means not only 'puppet' but also 'idol'. Ancient cultures often used animated figurines to worship their gods; for example, the Sámi culture incorporated a puppet of Thor into their religious festivals. In Ancient Egypt, puppets enacted religious rituals. According to Ioan Couliano, a Romanian historian of religion, the pharaonic word for a sculpture was 'ankh': "he who makes life" (cited in Nelson 2001:36). These gods, moreover, were mere statues only to the untrained observer, and were attended by shaven headed priests who fed them, bathed them and took them out on strolls (Nelson 2001:36). These figurines were animated to do their duties and tend to the aristocrat's mummy through magical spells. Their movements were, according to such accounts, only visible to initiates but not to outsiders.

Animated idols were also notable in the Hellenistic world and, as John Cohen vividly describes, "at Antiu, the birthplace of Hierapolis in Great Phrygia, there are statues that walk from place to place; and melodious voices from virgins of stone fill the temple at Delphi …The Statue of Memnon, when struck by the rays of the rising sun, emitted sounds like those given by the string of a lyre" (Cohen 1966: 16). The statues were filled with herbs and plants, and then allegedly brought to life, at which time they often lit up first, then laughed or smiled, or – most importantly – began prophesying, as legend has it. Live birds were for example, sacrificed to a statuette of Eros so that it took on their breath. Once these statues were activated they were believed to fly

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[9] I use this term to suggest that which relates to an imaginary or spiritual world (Oxford Dictionaries 2014).

off on their various missions as their activators' supernatural assistant (Nelson 2001: 36).

The animation of idols remained the ultimate expression of the notion that humans could imitate the gods' powers of creation. By the end of the fifth century, the god statues of Mediterranean Late Antiquity were literally toppled by Christianity, then the dominant religion of the former Roman Empire. It was particularly against the power of these puppet idols that the biblical second commandment was aimed. Physical vandalism of cult statues, of course, did not eliminate the powerful impulse for idolatry, even among the Christian faithful.

Over long historical periods, transcendental forces, once perceived, as external, would slowly be internalised to those areas of human perception labelled the 'imagination' and the 'unconscious'. The 'low art' of secular entertainment would come to fill the void left first by the expulsions of god statues and later by the expulsion of religious experience itself from the main currents of Western intellectual culture. Ultimately, art and science would substitute religious worship as silent venues for the drawing-down of the divine or the raising-up of the human. After the sixteenth century, western artists and writers would continue to express, though often in an unconscious manner, hidden and increasingly taboo notions of 'immortality', 'divinity' and the 'incorruptible body' (Nelson 2001: 44). Removed from the western religious realm, these earthly gods were forced underground, only to emerge outside the church walls, on street corners and at festivals. The 'low' tradition of puppets was initiated through popular comedic shows put on by travelling players, as public marionette performances swept across Western Europe. Non-religious automata, along with folklore concerning constructed or resurrected human bodies, became considerably significant western art forms, which spread to theatre, fantastic literature and ultimately modern-day film.

As the practice of 'ensouling' matter moved from religion (the realm of belief) to art (the realm of make-believe or imagination), it is evident that the once-worshipped idol was transformed, in secular works of imagination, from a divine body within an organised religious belief system into a kind of automated, grotesque vessel for the puppet, robot, cyborg and virtual entity. It can be argued that these invented creatures of our imagination still carry for us that uncanny aura, which we continue to pursue in a secular context. My study is thus based on the discourse surrounding puppets and idols that have been discussed above, and in the next chapter I will explore the metamorphosis of the grotesque notion of spiritualising objects through the manipulation of aesthetics and movement.

CHAPTER 2

STOP MOTION AND GROTESQUE PUPPETS

2.1 The Origin of Stop Motion Films

The stop motion animation technique is a contemporary form of puppetry that fulfils an important role within a secular context. With the discovery of motion picture filmmaking, a demand grew for innovative films, which mesmerized and enchanted the audiences with revolutionary methods. The establishment of filmmaking created a new platform for storytelling with more possibilities of interpreting and exaggerating fictional realms and existences. This led to the development of "trick films" which used optical effects and "cinematic sleight of hand" to create "magical illusions" (Holman 1975:21). One of the visual illusions employed in these films was the stop-frame substitution method, which involved disconnecting the camera during the filming process and then placing an actor or object into a new position in the frame, after which the camera would be switched on again and the filming process would continue. Upon viewing the final rendering of the film, the actor or object would 'supernaturally' move from one position to another.

American filmmaker Alfred Clark was the first to discover this technique, which he used to film a beheading scene in the film *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (1895). He substituted a full-size puppet with the actor in only one frame of the film to portray an unnerving death scene (Bendazzi 1994: 7). It was, however, George Méliés, a French illusionist and filmmaker, who first used the technique to make inanimate objects move and graciously levitate in many of his films, in the earliest days of cinema. Méliés accidentally discovered the stop-frame substitution technique in 1896, and was one of the first filmmakers to use time-lapse photography, multiple exposures and hand-painted coloration in his films. With the innovative ability to seemingly manipulate and transform reality through cinematography, Méliés is sometimes referred to as the first "Cinemagician" (Bendazzi 1994: 7). Two of his most acclaimed films are *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and *The Impossible Voyage* (1904) – see Figures 1 and 2. Both narratives involve bizarre, surreal voyages, somewhat similar to the writings of Jules Verne, and are considered among the most significant early science fiction films. Méliés was also one of the first filmmakers to explore grotesque themes in his work, such as *Le Manoir du diable* (1896), which marks him as an early pioneer of horror cinema.

Figure 1. George Méliés, *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 09:16.

Figure 2. George Méliés, *The Impossible Voyage* (1904). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 07:56.

17

These early animation pioneers,[10] whom Bedazzi refers to as "paleoanimators" (1994:7), would employ this stop-frame substitution method to create films that display the first use of animation in cinema history. During the first decade of the twentieth century, these early animators discovered and experimented with various types of animation methods such as clay, pixilation[11] (not to be confused with pixelation[12]) and the three-dimensional animation technique of puppetry.

Bendazzi (1994: 25-26) explains that, up until the 1930s, European animation was predominantly produced by individuals or small groups of people, as a result of the undeveloped nature of Europe's film industry in comparison to its American counterpart. This environment in Europe provided amateurs and independent artists the opportunity to experiment with alternative animation methods other than labour-intensive cel animation.[13] These methods included the adaptation of traditional performance puppetry techniques into sophisticated and widely used puppet animation techniques in films, particularly in Eastern Europe.

2.2 The History of Puppets in Stop Motion

The inception of puppet animation is predominantly associated with Eastern Europe, which has produced many great puppet animators since the early twentieth century (Furniss 1998:156). John Halas and Roger Manvell postulate a likely reason in their book, *The Technique of Film Animation* (1953): "[T]he main development of the puppet-doll film has been in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Russia and Germany, all of those countries where there is a peasant tradition of craftsmanship in the carving and designing of puppets and dolls" (1953: 236).

Three of the most significant puppet animation initiates are Ladislas Starewitch, Alexander Ptushko and Jiří Trnka. They paved the way for future masters of puppet animation who would develop a distinctive Eastern European puppet animation style in post-war Europe.

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[10] Such pioneers include the filmmakers Edwid Porter, Walter Booth, James Stuart Blackton, and Segundo de Chomon (Bendazzi 1994:7).

[11] 'Pixilation' is a term used in film when the movements of an actor (real human) is filmed or edited in such a way that the actor appears to move like an animated character (Oxford Dictionaries 2014). Examples of pixilation can be seen in *Bad Man He Comin'* (2009) – as seen in Figure 13.

[12] Pixelation is the division of an image into small particles or dots, typically for the display or storage of an image in digital format (Oxford Dictionaries 2014).

[13] Cel animation is a traditional form of animation used in the production of graphic novels, cartoons and animated feature films where each frame is drawn by hand. In this context, 'cel' refers to the transparent celluloid sheet used to transfer final drawings to paper. Early Walt Disney films, such as *Snow White* (1937) was created entirely by hand using cel animation.

One of the earliest known practitioners who used puppets in film from this region began his career as a natural scientist. Ladislas Starewitch was an established Russian-Polish biologist who began documenting insect life using motion picture technology during his stay at the Museum of Natural History at Korvo, Russia (Sawicki 2010: 73). The process of shooting live insects under hot electric lights proved to be unsuccessful as the insects became languid under the heat of the lamps. Starewitch took it upon himself to replicate realistic model representations of stag beetle subjects and made them move by employing stop motion animation. The result was not only very informative, but also exposed an amusing exhibition of the existence of these little creatures.

This technique led Starewitch to a lifelong career as puppet animator. Much of his subject matter was aimed at adult audiences; for instance, *The Revenge of the Movie Cameraman* (1912) dealt with the courting, or marital, wiles of two adulterous insects (Sawicki 2010: 73). Later in his career in France, Starewitch created *The Mascot* (1933), which is known for some of the most disturbing imagery ever to be recognised in stop motion animation (Sawicki 2010: 73). The film imagery was so striking that some of his work has been included in popular culture videos such as *Life in the Slaw Lane* by Kip Addotta (1984). Starewitch's work has served as an inspiration for later puppet animation filmmakers, such as the Brothers Quay and Tim Burton. Another Russian contemporary of Starewitch was Alexander Ptushko, who garnered acclaim for his remarkable use of puppets in his film *The New Gulliver* (1935). The film utilised over three thousand puppets, made of metal, rubber, wood and cloth, in a Soviet-orientated interpretation of Jonathan Swift's novel. The story is about a young boy who dreams of himself as a version of Gulliver who has landed in Lilliput, which is suffering under capitalist inequality and exploitation. *The New Gulliver* was released in 1935 to widespread acclaim and earned Ptushko a special prize at the International Cinema Festival in Milan.

After World War II, Czech animator Jiří Trnka became one of the leading luminaries of puppet film for two decades. He began as an apprentice to a puppeteer and graduated to become a book illustrator, a stage set designer and eventually a producer of stop motion animation films. One of his most widely acclaimed works is *The Hand* (1965), which won an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature. It was Trnka's last film and a veiled political statement against the enforced conformity that was predominant among filmmakers of Soviet-bloc countries during that era.

2.3 Švankmajer – Puppet Master of the Grotesque

Jan Švankmajer is perhaps best known as an animator of puppets and found objects who casts his creations in stories adapted from or inspired by gothic or central European folk literature. Švankmajer's films are immediately recognizable by their inanimate actors' stylised gestures, movements and appearances. Švankmajer works in a number of media but he is best known for his filmed surrealist animations of various, often disparate objects. He experimented with a variety of stop motion techniques such as pixilation, clay, and most importantly puppets, which he sometimes combined with live-action to create his surrealist films. As disarranged as his films might seem, his process of creation is extremely disciplined. Švankmajer has even formulated his own Decalogue of creative dictums, although he states that he does not consciously refer to this. In his own words "these rules somehow emerged through my work, they didn't precede it" (cited in Hames 2008:141). In point three in Švankmajer's Decalogue, he draws attention to the fact that his animated work is concerned with the depiction of the hidden life of found objects:

> Use animation as a magical operation. Animation isn't about making inanimate objects move, it is about bringing them to life. Before you bring an object to life, try to understand it first. Not its utilitarian function, but its inner life. Objects, especially the old ones, were witnesses to certain happenings, people's actions, their fortunes, which somehow marked them. People touched them in different situations, while acting under various emotions, and they imprinted onto them these different mental states. If you want to disclose some of these hidden aspects of objects through your camera, you need to listen. Sometimes even for years. First you have to become a collector, and only then a filmmaker. Bringing objects to life through animation has to be a natural process. Life has come from within them, and not from your whim. Never violate objects! Don't tell through them your own stories, tell theirs. (cited in Hames 2008: 140)

Objects, in Švankmajer's view, are thus never neutral; they possess a will, they make demands on their hosts, and determine their own organisational logic. In such a context, surrealism is a general term that is often used to describe his work, but as Švankmajer practices it, it might be thought of as a particular form of archiving[14] that shatters some of the barriers that exist between

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[14] In general archiving refers to the act of collecting and placing documents, records or other materials of historical interest in a storage area (Oxford Dictionaries 2014). Švankmajer's means of archiving refers to the collection and storage of objects of emotional and personal interest.

seemingly inharmonious objects. Stop motion animation, thought of in the way Švankmajer incorporates it into his work, is a near-complete grotesque method to alienate familiar objects by altering their presumed context and by rearranging and displaying them in astounding ways. Švankmajer can be referred to as a master of juxtaposition, assembling narratives, both from bits and pieces of found film, but also from bits and pieces of discarded culture (such as dolls, buttons, playing cards, bones, meat, etcetera).

Švankmajer's practice of animation is also a philosophy that informs his approach to the collection, archiving and distortion of objects and artefacts that might be considered as cultural waste. Švankmajer is, moreover, a collector whose obsessions are evident in all his work. The objects that populate his films define his cinematic aesthetics. As such, Švankmajer's artistic experimentation in tactility attempts to employ materiality in a surrealistic manner to investigate the life of familiar objects in everyday life. These are perhaps regenerative attempts to lessen the sombre realities of human existences that inhabit his films. In almost all his work, the individual is at the mercy of a world full of unsympathetic objects and unseen forces of life.

In the following section, an examination of the distortion and manipulation of objects in Švankmajer's films into grotesque bodies will demonstrate how stop motion animation serves as a driving force and metaphor for the embedded carnivalesque in his work. The animation of puppets poses further questions about the relation of the animate to the inanimate, and thereby our own relation to the non-living.

2.4. The Ontology of a Grotesque Puppet: Two Case Studies

It is important to acknowledge that the grotesque puppet, as I employ this definition in this thesis and in my own practical work, is essentially an inanimate object that is bestowed with the ability to embody or suggest life. The fact that the puppet is fundamentally a performing object demonstrates that is has a different ontology to that of a bodily organism. Also, the puppet's state of striving to depict and embody life means that it has a different ontological narrative from those of a plant, animal or human being. Because the puppet is an anthropomorphised object it ultimately takes a bodily form in human sub-consciousness. The physical make-up of every bodily form determines a specific ontological significance in relation to its purpose of being. Basil Jones compares the "Ur-narratives"[15] of a human actor and a performing puppet in his

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[15]"Ur" is a combining form used to describe "earliest" or "original", and it is used in words to express the "primal stage of a historical or cultural entity of phenomenon" (Oxford Dictionaries 2014). Jones uses the term "Ur-narrative" to refer to the early history/storyline of being (both puppet and human).

essay, 'Puppetry and Authorship' (2009). To him, the human actor's Ur-narrative is the desire to function as the medium of stories and narratives, whereas the puppet's Ur-narrative is quite different as:

> It is the quest for life itself … it forms the impulse behind every move and every gesture the puppet makes. This quest is one in which no actor can engage as it lies outside an actor's ontological purview (2009:255).

It is exactly this "quest for life" that relates to the grotesque reality of any puppet's existence. Unlike the human actor, the puppet has no biological systems (muscular, circulatory and nervous systems etcetera) of its own to assist it in its struggle to embody life, but has to rely on its material form, and the transference of energy from the human animator to its own body, to express existence.

"The grotesque body," Mikhail Bakhtin writes in his work on grotesque realism, "is a body in the act of becoming, It is never finished, never completed" (1965:317). Similarly, the body of a puppet represents an unfinished metamorphosis between organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate, spiritual and physical. Bruno Shultz, horror writer and great influence on Švankmajer, shares this metamorphic tradition of interchangeable forms in his writings by arguing that "the life of the substance consists in the assuming and consuming of numberless masks…this migration of forms is the essence of life" (cited in Nelson 2001:114).

In Švankmajer's work, objects, household items, animal bones and especially food, seemingly burst into life whenever the viewer turns his/her attention to them. Their ontology follows the rules of their own profane and deformed anatomy. The liveliness of the grotesque puppet can be illustrated through the artistic quality of the object (puppet body), in combination with the dictation of movement provided by animator and the involved technique (stop motion animation).

An evaluation of a selection of puppets from one of Švankmajer's films, *Something from Alice* (1988) as well as one of my own films, *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011), may provide some insights into the metamorphosis of objects into grotesque bodies.

2.4.1 *Something from Alice*

Something from Alice (1988)[16] is a grotesque fantasy, combining the animation of objects and a child actress, in a surreal dream-like alchemy. The film is a personal interpretation of Lewis Carrol's original story, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Švankmajer claims that he had not read the novel since he was a child, and that he relied on the communication and expression of his unconscious mind to illustrate the original story (O'Kane 2009: 36). His interpretation relies on his distorted childhood memory, rather than the original text, as an aesthetic vehicle. To him, the childhood memory offers an infinite well of inspiration, as it contains the deep-rooted anxieties and obsessions of human concerns (Hames 2008: 140). The artist's own obsessions and fears become realised in the infantile interpretation of Carrol's outlandish Wonderland. In *Something from Alice* (1988) the 'classic characters' that Alice encounters on her pursuit for the White Rabbit take on various forms, such as deformed puppet bodies, sinister household objects and children's toys. The artist's unique portrayal of Carrol's notorious characters accommodates the surreal, the grotesque and the hopeless, with emphasis placed on the illogical and disjointed narrative of a dream (or the unconscious). Švankmajer gives metamorphosis a considerably macabre twist, reserving his most powerful skills of expression to capture the sense of a deformed biology that lies beyond the reach of written language. Švankmajer renders the dreaded physical metamorphosis of objects into bodies in superbly exaggerated excess.

In the film,[17] Alice, the only character (partially) interpreted by a human, is stuck in a malicious transformative cycle, alternating from human to inhuman, throughout the duration of the film. In the story, Alice's physical size changes continually as her frequent desire for consumption permeates her progression through Wonderland. When Alice is reduced in size, her human character transforms into an animated puppet simulating her appearance as a little girl (see Figure 3). The viewer is constantly reminded of the ever-changing cycle of destruction and renewal. The puppet as object embodies the material aspect of the bodily form, in which the character is permeated and greatly affected by the decay of the physical world.

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[16] The original Czech title is *Něco z Alenky,* meaning 'Something from Alice'.
[17] See Addendum A to view the films *Something from Alice* (1988) and *Bad man He Comin'* (2011).

Figure 3. Jan Švankmajer, *Something from Alice* (1988). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 47:56.

In contrast to Alice's on-going metamorphosis, the other characters that inhabit this world each seem to be trapped in a state of their own transfiguration. These characters represent a more sordid and vulgar representation of Carrol's original whimsical characters. Alice's confrontations with these creatures evoke a distressing dream world, thus illustrating the monstrosities that reside in nightmares. As a craftsman of such beings, Švankmajer resembles horror writer, Bruno Schultz's, Father character in the role of a latter-day magus[18] who announces the genesis of his spontaneous creations in his dreams, namely,

> a species of beings only half organic, a kind of pseudofauna and pseudoflora, the result of a fantastic fermentation of matter. They were creations resembling, in appearance only, living creatures such as crustaceans, vertebrates, cephalopods. In reality the appearance was misleading – they were amorphous creatures, with no internal structure, products of the imitative tendency of matter which, equipped with memory, repeats from force of habit the forms already accepted (Schultz 1977: 66).

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[18] Magus, or "creator of magic", is a Greek word for the Zoroastrian (an ancient Iranian religion) priests of old Persia (Nelson 2001:7). The word was later adapted by early Christian tradition and appears in both the Old and New Testaments where it is rendered as "wise man" (Nelson 2001:8).

Figure 4. Jan Švankmajer, *Something from Alice* (1988). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 52:12.

Some species of Švankmajer's creatures show the same imitative characteristics and lack of internal structures, while others are composed of invertebrates alone. One example of such creatures is the misassembled animals that are under the control of the White Rabbit (who is in return dominated by the Queen of Hearts). They represent the lowest of species in Wonderland and are presented with the task of assisting the White Rabbit in the hunt for Alice, after which she must be taken to the queen to be beheaded. These characters include some important creatures form Carrol's novel (Bill the lizard, the Duck, the Eaglet and the Lory), as well as a few additional eccentric creatures from Švankmajer's recollection (see Figure 4 for an example of one of these creatures). The grotesque and the absurd can be recognized in the artist's creation of freakish bodies. Švankmajer transforms their bodies through the use of taxidermy, thus creating seemingly 'unnatural' (that is, biologically inaccurate or disorganized) anatomical displays, and dress them in the wardrobe of Punchinello.[19]

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[19] Punchinello refers to an absurd or satiric character, sometimes referred to as a clown or buffoon in burlesque puppet plays. The puppet Punch from original *Punch and Judy* puppet plays is based on such a character (George 1970:15).

25

Figure 5. Jan Švankmajer, *Something from Alice* (1988). Screenshot of a Stop-Motion Film. 57:38.

One of these creatures includes a four-legged skeletal fish creature with two chicken eggs resting within its ribcage, as if waiting to hatch, as seen in Figure 5. In another example, a skull drags a single horse's hoof behind it, as it was some miscarried experiment of the artist (or inventor). In this regard, Švankmajer's creatures share a close resemblance to the fantastic juxtapositions of the physiques (a horse's neck with a man's head, a woman's body with a fish's tail) found in the *grotte* of Nero's *Domus Aurea* (as referred to in Chapter 1).

The objects in *Something from Alice* (1988) are severely abstruse, as transformation takes place at several levels of the film.   Pebbles become edible biscuits, socks burrow through floorboards like an infestation of woodworms, bread rolls grow nails and become hedgehogs, and a baby's cradle grows wings and takes flight. This obscurity is most evident when Švankmajer renders Alice's size not only by reducing and enlarging her through ingenious stop motion film techniques, but by making her appear as a girl, puppet and effigy simultaneously. Švankmajer's metamorphic use of objects to represent the animate adds to the strong logic of grotesque imagery in the film.

2.4.2 *Bad Man He Comin'*

Bad Man He Comin' (2011) is a contemporary example of a locally produced stop motion animation film and contains several manifestations of grotesque puppets. For the purpose of this section I investigate the objects used in creating the puppets for this film, and I specifically examine how the grotesque is manifested through the metamorphosis of found objects into

26

puppet bodies. I have selected *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011) as a film from my own body of practical work. I believe that my personal involvement with this film may offer insightful knowledge to the discussion concerning the relationship between myself as puppet-designer, and the found objects that I used for creating my puppets.

The found materials (or objects) that the puppets are fashioned from determine to a great extent the make-up and ontological status of these grotesque puppets. In my work, the materials that I use to create a puppet's body determine its characteristics and functionality. In order to demonstrate this idea, I draw on the example of the lead characters in the chosen film, Fred Visser,[20] to demonstrate how objects were used and combined to reference the grotesque in the body of a puppet.

What follow is a short discussion of the production outline and a synopsis of the narrative to provide the reader with a better understanding of the context of the film. *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011) is a stop motion puppetry music video for a South African music group named *Mr. Cat & the Jackal*. In contrast to Švankmajer's *Something from Alice* (1988), it is a puppetry production set in a contemporary and popular context of stop motion film productions where the Internet, television music channels and international short film festivals play a major role in its dissemination and public reception. The primary inspiration for the film derives from the song's satirical lyrics that centre on the life of an unremorseful murderer who is on the loose. This song is an ominous tale of fear and death and, as the lyrics suggest, "you can pray all you want, beg on your knees…he'll hack you to pieces, he'll chop of your head" (Du Plessis 2010).

In short, the story follows the journey of a dismantled half-torso (half man, half animal), on a quest to rebuild his corroded body. As an emblem of death, the character (Fred Visser) takes no precautions in obtaining body parts – a quest that comes at the expense of the living. Towards the end the film, the violent clashes between him and the living turn to parody when he his passion for carnage is traded for an infatuation for music. With a stolen Banjolin,[21] he returns to the underworld to join an orchestra of other dismantled figures. As the film suggests, the fear of death is parodied through humour as the puppet's body is renewed through the participation of and underground carnival – an idea that resonates strongly with Bakhtin's conception of both the

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[20] The name 'Fred Visser' was engraved on the fallen tombstone from which the puppet surfaces in the beginning of the film.

[21] A Banjolin or Mandolin-Bango is a hybrid musical instrument combined of the body of a banjo and the neck of a mandolin. The Banjolin in the film was designed and crafted by the songwriter of *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011).

carnivalesque and grotesque.

Figure 6. Yesterfang Puppetry and Animation, *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 03:38.

The use of animal bones and organs is one example of grotesque objects that are used in the film. In the second scene of the film, Fred Visser appears in a small empty house in front of a boiling pot of stew. Unable to see inside the pot themselves, the viewers must make their own assumptions of what the pot possibly contains. It could be the remains of the absent inhabitant of the house or an abandoned lunch of a terrified resident. The unease increases as the puppet takes a gulp of the stew, with an animated tongue suddenly being visible in his mouth after he swallows down the dregs from a cup. This animated tongue becomes part of his body, although it does seem to take on a life of its own and, with its involuntary spasms and movements, it suggests the life of the victim it came from. At the same time it also fights for its own survival by refusing to be eaten and rather choosing to become part of Fred Visser's skeletal body. This suggests a degree of agency that this object seemingly enjoys, while it is also transformed into a part of another bodily ontology (see Figure 7), thus rendering it an ambivalent organ/organism.

Figure 7. Yesterfang Puppetry and Animation, *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 01:34

Figure 8. Yesterfang Puppetry and Animation, *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 02:16.

At a later stage the puppet (Fred Visser) stalks up to a sleeping shepherd under a tree (this character is a real human), after which he unbuttons the shepherd's shirt and plucks out the man's heart. With the heart still pumping in the puppet's hand, sand gushes from the empty chest of the shepherd's deprived body, reuniting him with the earth. This is a deliberate reference to the Bakhtinian idea of the 'grotesque'.

In *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011), the function of puppets as grotesque entities are also revealed through the narrative, as well as the objects out of which they are created. The characters were not pre-designed with elaborate mechanics or store-bought materials, but constructed from resources found on the location of the shoot, which is Trompsburg in the Free State. It is perhaps important to note that I grew up on the farm that served as the very location of the production. I spend most of my childhood outdoors and I am familiar with the objects that this landscape has to offer. The use of animal bones as toys is a specific example that is reminiscent of my childhood, such as the *Kakebeenwa en Dolosse*[22] which is a traditional Afrikaner toy made of bones that represents a wagon that is being pulled by oxen. The wagon would consist of a large animal jaw (horse or pig) and the oxen of the small feet bones of sheep – see Figure 9 for an example of such a toy.

Figure 9. *Kakebeenwa en Dolosse* (1983). Animal bones and String. Collection: Willem Prinsloo Agricultural Museum, Pretoria.

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[22] The Afrikaans word *Dolosse* or *Dobbel Bene* also refers to the knuckle bones of sheep or goats used by *Sangomas* (African diviners) practicing fortune-telling (Collins English Dictionary 2014).

The juvenile spontaneity of making 'playthings' from found objects (bones, feathers and wood) forms the foundation of the creative process in *Bad Man He Comin'*. In a recent report on the evolution of 'play', David Whitebread (2012:19-21) demonstrates the importance of play with objects in the development of primates and young children:

> When young children are making or building, they are also often developing a story or narrative. It is a relatively well-researched type of play, as it is distinctively related to the development of thinking, reasoning and problem-solving skills. When playing with objects, children set themselves goals and challenges, monitor their progress towards them, and develop an increasing repertoire of cognitive and physical skills and strategies (2012: 20)

This juvenile method of problem-solving with objects is also evident in the construction of my own puppets' bodies. A deconstruction of the objects and materials used in making functional body parts for the puppets demonstrates how objects form an integral part on the creation of the film's narrative structure. In *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011) the found object's role progressed with the development of the narrative through my own 'play with objects'. A dissection of the lead character's (Fred Visser) puppet body reveals the grotesque transformation of objects and their role in the development of the narrative and character design: the arms and legs of the puppet are constructed from the pelvic limbs of two different sheep; the head, hands, hooves and sternum are carved from wood; a used billiard ball functions as a rotating eyeball; the teeth and jowl are constructed from a horse skull turned upside down; strains of horsehair and sheep's wool were used on his head and hooves; sheep organs were used for the tongue, heart and oesophagus; and additional materials used for joints include trolley wheels, the spinal chord of a sheep, pieces of cane and elastic rubber bands.

The assemblage of the above objects resulted in a transmuted creature. As a result, the body parts of four different animals, in conjunction with several household and handmade objects, gave 'rise' to the grotesque body of Fred Visser. Kayser argues that the nature of "the grotesque is the estranged world", yet the elements in it that seem 'familiar' and 'natural' to us turn out to be odd and ominous (1957:184-187). Along these lines, the body of Fred Visser is a joining of 'familiar' and 'natural' objects in a grotesque structure, resulting in an open-ended metamorphosis of the familiar world.   The puppet's body comprises of *fauna* and *florae* at different stages of

31

metamorphosis and conjugation. The distinction between carved wood, dry bones, running blood, fresh meat and other objects suggest a 'play' between life and death, birth and decay.

The "material bodily value" in grotesque realism is the principle Bakhtin refers to as the body's connection to its earthiness, which means that the body cannot forsake its union with the soil from which it endlessly arises (1965: 18). This process of accentuating and drawing from the material realm of body and earth is a formative trait of the grotesque and, as my discussion revealed, is also evident in the construction of puppet bodies in *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011).

CHAPTER 3

RAISING THE GROTESQUE PUPPET

3.1 Puppetry and communication through touch

Jan Švankmajer has experimented with tactility as a sensory modality in which objects stimulate affect through their correspondence to the artist's hand, as well as to the haptic perception[23] of the viewer. Švankmajer understands tactile experience in terms of poetic metamorphosis (Vasseleu 2009: 143) – an idea that resonates with his creation of grotesque puppets.

In touching, we do more than provoke and react to the tactile qualities of things we come into contact with – in touching we enter into a fold of psychophysical interactions with the living and the non-living. For the human subject, touching can create an animistic sense of identity with objects. Although touch is usually associated with the dermal surface of human or animal bodies, it can also be a metaphor for the delivery of information to the interior of the subject, particularly in terms of the skin's capacity to arouse emotion (Vasseleu 2009: 143).

Before Švankmajer was a filmmaker, he was an artist and writer, and worked in both live- and puppet theatres (such as the *Theatre of Masks* and the *Laterna Magika Puppet Theatre*). His tactile experiments began in 1974 as a collaborative project, called *Restaráteur* (or *Restorer*), which he formulated for members of the *Czech Surrealist Group*. He took it upon himself to create pioneering exercises in the retraining of tactile perception, with his exploration of sources of tactile creativity for this project including erotica, childhood tactile memories and tactile dreams. The primary function of *Restorer* was to study the extent to which touch is capable of stimulating associative thinking and become a stimulus for the imagination (Vasseleu 2009: 145). According to Vasseleu, Švankmajer was convinced by his experiments that tactile objects could express feelings just as well as words, colours, or shapes. If the field of grotesque realism is directed to bring "the world close to man" to give "it a bodily form" and establish "a link through the body and bodily life" (Bakhtin 1965: 35-39), then Švankmajer sought to demonstrate along such lines, that tactile experience restores human access to the world and to our own bodily life.

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[23] Haptic perception is a form of nonverbal communication through the means of touch. Sensory beings can recognise an environment or object through haptic perception.
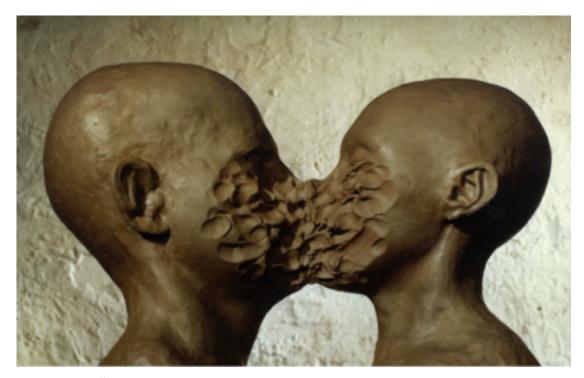
Figure 10. Jan Švankmajer, *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film, 04:29.

Švankmajer developed a particular interest in the idea that both direct and indirect touch is mediated by the "tactile imagination" (Vasseleu 2009: 145). His idea for this was found in Merleau-Ponty's[24] phenomenological studies which discredited the idea that touch only occurs as a result of direct physical contact, and could thus be regarded as proof of the existence of "tactile memory" (Vasseleu 2009:142-144). Despite the substantial difference between tactile art and audio-visual media, Švankmajer was able to apply his experiences in tactile experimentation to his filmmaking. Having studied haptic perception for a significant time period, he observed the ways touch unites and intermingles with sight:

> There is a tactile memory that stretches back to the most remote corner of our childhood, from which it bursts out in the form of analogies evoked by the slightest tactile stimulus or by stirred tactile fantasy. Tactile art thus becomes communicative (Švankmajer cited in Vasseleu 2009 152-153).

The term 'tactile animation' is sometimes applied to clay animation, a familiar stop motion

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[24] Merleau-Ponty argues that we should regard the body not as a mere biological or physical unit, but as the body that structures one's situation and experience within the world (1945: 3-13).

technique that is created by manually manipulating ready-mouldable materials, such as plasticine, and recording each change of pose frame-by-frame. Although Švankmajer incorporates the animating of clay in his films, as do masters of clay animation such as Tim Burton and Henry Selick, there is a significant difference between them (Vasseleu 2009:153). Švankmajer does not declare himself to be a stop motion filmmaker, or even as a film director, for that matter, but rather sees himself as an "artist of alchemy" (cited in Hames 2008: 96). He acknowledges that animators cannot do without technological support, but he states that such support must be used to invoke the human's purported animistic ability to spiritualise matter (Švankmajer 1994:111). For Švankmajer, film animation is just another alchemical aid for the performance of an ancient magic ritual in which a person, or *demiurge*,[25] summons forth the inherent energy that resides in inorganic material. To him, the capacity for metamorphosis applies equally to the making of tactile art or moving images. In both practices, objects undergo a symbolic transformation, forsaking their prior utilitarian functions in life to become metaphors for denied memories, emotions, sexual fantasies, and alternate ideologies (Vasseleu 2009:154). These exchanges between objects and forms of touch show a complex relation between puppetry and the hand of the artist and the imagination of the viewer. In Švankmajer's films, the viewer's tactile memory of known objects is transformed through the intrusion of Švankmajer's own tactile imagination, resulting in the disturbance of our memory and perception. In the dark recesses of Švankmajer's films, animation is paralleled with the recovery of "buried bodies" and "artefacts" of the history of civilization (Wells 2002:4), and the recycling of a "mass grave" of assembly-line human products from which new creatures arise (Nottingham 2004:131).

Švankmajer's work allows for a complex renegotiation of the relationship between the human body and the world we experience through touch. I would argue that this exchange between the artist's hand and the material world shows a link between Švankmajer and Bakhtin's conception of the human body. Švankmajer's idea of tactile memory bears certain similarities to Bakhtin's argument for "the body's connection to its earthiness" (Bakhtin 1965:18), and it references the same paradigm by which the "material bodily value" in Bakhtin's theory of grotesque realism is identified. As Švankmajer argues:

> I am a hand. And a hand is a tool. I am, therefore a tool. A tool for giving and
> receiving emotions (thus not a working tool). On the palm of my soul are engraved

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[25] Demiurge is the Greek word for 'artisan' or 'public worker'. "'Demiurgy' or 'world creating' was later taken up as a concept throughout the late ancient world … it was a role Christians assigned to God" (Nelson 2001:34)

my life-lines. On occasion I read them in front of the mirror. This activity lost the flavour of anxious narcissism a long time ago. I am the victim of tactilism (Švankmajer 2002:6).

Švankmajer further states that to divorce touch from the human senses is unimaginable and can only result in the loss of tactile memory and imagination (2002:6). Švankmajer's hypothesis to animate matter through touch corresponds with Bakhtin's formulation of the grotesque according to which he refers to the body's connection to its earthiness: "the body cannot forsake its union [with] the soil" (Bakhtin 1965:18). For both Švankmajer and Bakhtin, touch is central to our experience of the world, our material realities, our bodies and our vast imagination.

3.2 Making a Puppet: On Collection and Building

In the practice of puppetry, whether it is in theatre, parade, or in audio-visual performances of puppets, it is important to acknowledge and investigate the role of the maker. The maker of the puppet is partially responsible for the ontology of the puppet, and thus the life the puppet represents in performance. The assemblage of parts creates the structure of the puppet, which allows for certain forms of expression. In the case of puppets designed for theatre performance, as in the work of the *Handspring Puppet Company*, the expert design is very sensitive to the movement required by the puppet (Jones 2009:254). Thus, a large part of the vivacity of the puppet is the responsibility not only of the puppeteer or animator, but of the maker as well.

Švankmajer, however, is no expert puppet 'engineer', as his creations are mere accumulations of found objects, deceased animals, children's toys and used theatre marionettes. Švankmajer does not make too much of a distinction between creating and collecting as, to him, both are directed by the principle of obsession (Vasseleu 2009:144). In his *Decalogue* (2008), Švankmajer states that such "obsessions are the relics of your childhood …the most precious treasures come from the depths of childhood" (Švankmajer 2008). When making a film, Švankmajer casts his collected objects in the same juvenile way that a child would cast the roles of the toys in his/her room during play. In Švankmajer's words, "the objects of my desire seek me out, not I them and it's similar with the subjects and the objects of my movies" (cited in Vasseleu 2009:).

On beholding the bizarre characters that reside within Švankmajer's films, it is hard to imagine that their otherworldly presence is the product of mundane objects that had undergone a metamorphic ritual. Švankmajer has been obsessed with collecting objects throughout his life.

36

Their actual value is not, however, the decisive factor that secures their place in the filmic *wunderkabinet* of this artist. Švankmajer compares his approach to collection and creation to the manuscripts of the old alchemists:

> There are many formulas for producing a sorcerers stone…old alchemist manuscripts mention sulphur, mercury, salt or lead, but not the chemical elements of sulphur, mercury and salt. It is similar with the objects I collect. These are only 'live' objects, full of substances, memories, and emotions, which had gone through a ritual (Švankmajer 2008)

The cabinet of wonders that Švankmajer has created retains in principle the traditional division of a classical *wunderkabinet*:[26] the category of *Naturalia* is represented by objects and collages of 'natural science'; *Exotica* is represented by a collection of African and Oceanic masks and fetishes; *Artificialia* includes a thematic collection based on the *Arcimboldesque* principle[27] in which paintings and drawings from the eighteenth century to the present are gathered; *Scientica* is represented by only a few pages of the 'Technology' section of Švankmajer's *Bilderlexikon*[28] and by a set of graphics that depict masturbation machines (Švankmajer 2011:104). These are just a few of the classifications of Švankmajer's cabinet of wonders; others include *Funerilia*, *Horribilia*, *Militaria* and *Vetustissima*.

Švankmajer's seemingly rational (or at least clearly delineated) classification of his collections stands in direct contrast to his irrational display of objects in his films. His destruction of categories in his films reveals a severely chaotic take on the supposed orderliness of the universe. This is, according to Kayser's definition of the grotesque, one of the main motivations behind creating grotesque art, namely the fusion of realms that we believe to be separate, the abolition of the law of statics and the suspension of 'universal', 'natural' categories of objects. This same deconstruction and metamorphosis of categories are evident in Švankmajer's surrealistic approach to filmmaking, and can be recognised in the characters, sets and themes of his films.

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[26] Also referred to as 'Cabinets of Curiosities', 'Kunstkammers' or the 'Kunstkabinett'. These rooms served as encyclopaedic collections of objects that did not fit the existing categories of European Renaissance (Thomas 1977:201)

[27] *Arcimboldesque* artworks were compositions made of various stones or shells arranged to resemble human heads. These images also approximate the grotesque because they combine disparate elements to create monstrous appearances (Kaufmann 2009: 198).

[28] *Bilderlexikon* is a German term used to refer to an interactive illustrated encyclopaedia (Glosbe 2014)

3.3 Puppetry and the Relationship between Animate and Inanimate

As the previous section revealed, the stop motion process allows for transitional relationships between the animate and the inanimate. I would argue that this relationship of interactive exchange between an object and the living occurs on three separate stages, as within the greater realm of the stop motion process, a singular object or puppet's relationship with his human counterparts changes several times throughout the development of a film. In the case of Jan Švankmajer's *Something from Alice* (1988) the White Rabbit's character development demonstrates three main interchange phases between the animate and inanimate; firstly, between object and maker/designer; secondly, between object and animator; and thirdly, between object and live actor. In reference to my own work, I will discuss the character development of the skeletal puppet, Fred Visser in *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). I will pay specific attention to what I call its collective existence, that is, its existence between the two makers and three animators who were involved in the process and its interaction with both human and animal actors.

Jan Švankmajer's portrayal of the White Rabbit in *Alice (1988)* reveals a sinister and grotesque version of Lewis Carroll's story. At the beginning of the film, the White Rabbit is introduced in a scientific fashion, as a taxidermic animal complete in a glass display case, labelled as the classified species *Lepus Cuniculus*.[29] This particular introduction of the rabbit as a collectable object (which might very well have been displayed in his cabinet of wonders under *Naturalia*) marks a significant aspect of the transitional change from maker to animator in Švankmajer's animation process.

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[29] This is the Latin classification for 'Common Rabbit' or 'European Rabbit' with its physical description being that of a small, fawn-coloured or sometimes black mammal. It is not certain whether Švankmajer intentionally mislabeled the White Rabbit as a different species.

Figure 11. Jan Švankmajer, *Something from Alice* (1988). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 05:35.

For Švankmajer, the acts of collecting and organising objects mark the first phase of the filmmaking process. As he states in his *Decalogue*, "first you have to become a collector, and only then a filmmaker" (Švankmajer 2008:140). In the film, the rabbit's mounted position is suddenly disrupted when he pulls free from his mounted position and removes the nails from his paws with his teeth. As the White Rabbit bites onto a nail, his chest tears open and sawdust falls onto the floor. This reveals that it is a stuffed rabbit, with the intestines, organs and skeleton removed from the animal's body. The White Rabbit can no longer function through his own bodily functions, but is reliant on another source of power – in this case it is the intervention of the animator. The animator's task to bring the object 'to life' entails far more than just moving the position of the object/puppet in a sequence of frames. Firstly, it involves a thorough understanding of the written script, as the animator's work is determined by the script that is produced by the writer. A study of the script allows the animator to submerge him/herself in the persona of the character in order to know what form of animation is requested to embody the character's temperament, gestures and quality of movement.

The White Rabbit's personality, for example, requires from the animator to suggest an elderly, timid and skittish character. For the animator to meet such particular demands requires an

extensive knowledge of movement. It is thus very important for the animator to get accustomed to the puppet's weight distribution and the function of its joints, as both bear certain limitations on the character's movement. The mechanical constrictions of the puppet or object compels the animator to draw on a more imaginative expression of movement, as the structure of the puppet's body has a different ontological dynamism to that of a living body.

In my own work, the abnormal weight distribution of the skeletal puppet, Fred Visser, in *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011), ultimately played an important role in giving rise to the seemingly unpredictable behaviour of the character. The head of the puppet who played Fred Visser was sculpted from a solid piece of wood, supported by a much lighter body constructed from animal bones, cane, and small parts of wood. As a result, the skeletal marionette was top-heavy, which made him very unstable during the animating process. It was furthermore demanded from the character to illustrate the struggle of existence – a demand for which his weightiness came in handy. Having to hold up a life-size marionette for an extended period of time demands great physical devotion from the animator or assistant involved in the filming process. The animation of the character's walk in this particular instance was created by hanging the puppet from one end of a steel rod, while the other end was supported by a ladder and one of the animators. By moving the rod in both vertical and horizontal directions, an axis of gravity was created by one animator, while the second animator was free to adjust the limbs according to the position of the rod. The puppet had to be held aloft for long periods of time in which the animators had to assume quite awkward postures. Puppet animation often makes quite extreme physical demands on the manipulator; therefore to deliver an array of sophisticated and difficult movements, the animator often has to be devoted to his/her task in a quasi-religious fervour (Jones 2009: 264). According to Basil Jones, it is possible for the manipulator to enter a kind of trance state, "a condition in which you will seem to be under the hypnosis of your own puppet" (2009: 264).

Figure 12. Yesterfang Puppetry and Animation, *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 01:02.

In contrast to live puppeteering, the stop motion animator cannot convey his/her energy through the puppet to generate a single flowing movement, but he/she has to simulate movement by repeatedly engaging and detaching him/herself from the puppet's body.   With a certain movement or gesture in mind, it is up to the animator's memory of movement to interpret and transform the desired action into a series of consecutive poses. These sequential photographed poses of the puppet's body, which, in combination, are the structure of the film, represents a deconstruction of movement, so to speak.

In both films mentioned above, there is also a form of interaction between the puppet and the human actor. To perform in a world that relies on the jumbling of objects, movement and time, the live actor has to abandon some of the rules of the natural world in order to adapt to the improvisatory procedures of the fantasy world. This implies that the human actor's movement has to be deconstructed in the same way as that of an inanimate object. For example, in *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011), the breathing pattern of the sleeping shepherd's (who is played by a live-actor) is a deconstruction of the chest's movement during the inhalation and exhalation of air. In order to get the effect of movement in this stop motion film, the actor had to hold his breath for several seconds, while the puppet in the background was being manipulated and moved in relation to the speed of his breathing. The animators had to keep in mind how many seconds

passed between each inhalation and exhalation in order to visually comply to the speed of the puppet's own movements.

Figure 13. Yesterfang Puppetry and Animation, *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Screenshot of a StopMotion Film. 01:42

Although Švankmajer incorporated this technique in most of his work, he also combined real-time film clips of human actors with stop motion clips of animated characters. Returning to the opening scene of *Something from Alice* (1988), both Alice (who is played by a child actor) and the White Rabbit (who is played by a puppet) appear together in Alice's room, although they never appear together in the same frame. Here, it is not required from the actress to deconstruct her movement as in the previous example, but she can act as if she is actually viewing the resurrection of the taxidermy rabbit. Here, Alice's response to the inanimate object reminds the viewer of the film's constant oscillation between dream and reality. In Švankmajer's work, the combination of live acting and stop motion becomes a symbol for the constant exchanges between dreams and reality, the conscious and unconscious, the human and the inanimate. As Švankmajer argues in terms of his filmmaking process:

> Keep exchanging dreams for reality and vice versa. There are no logical transitions. There is only one tiny physical act that separates dreams from reality: opening or closing your eyes. In daydreaming even that isn't necessary (cited in Hames

2008:141).

Figure 14. Yesterfang Puppetry and Animation, *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 02:44

In stop motion animation, it is the combined effort from the maker, animator and live actor that contribute to the believability of a character's existence. Stop motion animation can thus be seen as a multi-layered process of constructing a narrative and reality through the deconstruction of various elements, such as objects, movement, and time.

3.4 Puppetry and the Manipulation of Time and Space

Stop motion animation is by nature a time-based medium. It is an exploration of time in which the animator enters a twofold sphere of separate, yet parallel existences – the one is the lapse of time that the film suggest, the other is the actual time in which the animator works. By utilising the features of stop motion film and perception of vision, the animator attempts to re-enact his/her understanding of reality. In short, the film is the result of what an animator does (in real time) and what the inanimate puppet achieves (in filmic time). Based on my own observations as a practitioner in the field of stop motion animation, I will discuss the relationship between these different spheres or experiences of time. These two courses of time speak of a dynamic relationship between the animate and the inanimate, the living and the dead, which, as this section will demonstrate, relates with ideas surrounding the grotesque.

One can argue that the lifeless puppet is unaware of time, it is static and unconscious until the animator seemingly 'awakens' it. The animator does not only bring the puppet 'to life', but he/she also brings it into a certain time-based existence. Understanding this time-based existence is essential to the animator in order to suggest a puppet who experiences a certain reality or sense of life. According to Andy Joule, "the animator must be able to dissect this time, hold those fragments internally and instil them into the inanimate" (2011:119). This seemingly dual and conflicting creation of different times and realities is a distinguished characteristic of the grotesque, whether it arises out of conflict or as a mixture or conflation of different realities/times (Thomson 1972:18).

The animator's task is to understand and inhabit both these spheres of time in equal measure. In both *Something from Alice* (1988) and *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011), these separate courses of time are revealed through the use of time-lapse photography that captures a specific space, as well as the movement of the stop motion animated objects within that space. The important difference between a time-lapse sequence and a stop motion sequence is that a time-lapse is a purely observational and a non-interventionist process, whereas a stop motion sequence is an interventionist's approach to the medium, one that is controlled by the creator (Joule 2011: 120).

In *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011), the merging of the dual time passages can be perceived in the scenes that include both the natural world and the constructed presences of animated figures that inhabit that space. Because the greater part of the film was created out-of-doors, and not in the controlled environment provided by an indoor film set, the natural time-lapses of the landscape had to be accommodated in the stop motion time-lapses that the puppet required. One example of this phenomenon can be seen when the puppet, Fred Visser, lurks in the tall grass while scanning the landscape for potential body parts. In this scene, the puppet remains composed, with only a slight movement performed by his right hand. In contrast to his largely passive state, the clouds in the background moves extremely fast and the grass surrounding seem to twitch involuntarily – See Figures 15 and 16 for examples of such different time-lapses as captured in the film.

Figure 15. Yesterfang Puppetry and Animation, *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Screenshot of a Stop-Motion Film. 01:17

Figure 16. Yesterfang Puppetry and Animation, *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Screenshot of a Stop-Motion Film. 00:42

45

At first glance, the strange behaviour of the natural landscape seems to be created through a speeded-up photographic time-lapse, yet, in actual fact it was created by the 'absence of time', so to speak, that is only revealed in the final time-lapse (that is, the film as it is seen by the viewer). The animation of the puppet was executed parallel to the natural time-lapses of the sky and the grasslands, in which the animator had to enter the same setting (frame) several times to bring the puppet to life. These intermissions with the animator entering the scene is not documented in the final time-lapse, thus resulting in moments in time that are absent in the final film.

In the same way that the outcomes of a film that uses forms of time-lapse depend on the chosen frame rate,[30] so too does the choices of movement made by the animator affect the seeming reality (or believability) of the results. In exercising the time-lapse technique, the time taken between frames not only influence the duration of the shot, but also allow for a subtle amount of change to occur to be just noticeable to the audience.

Further manipulation of time and space can be accomplished through the application of sound. In stop motion animation, the pairing of certain sounds and imagery is essential in supporting the illusionary existence of an otherworldly ambiance. Jan Švankmajer is known for his extravagant and excessive use of sound in his films. The animated object cannot produce its own sound when interacting with its environment, as it is being photographed and not filmed. In *Something from Alice* (1988), Foley sound[31] functions as an additional tool for heightening the credibility of a certain animated movement, such as an anticipated footstep or a slurp of tea. Sound can also be used to calculate the distance between objects or to define the dimension of a specific space. For example, when Alice descends down the elevator shaft, the sounds that are used are very drawn-out and at the same time quite high in resonance. This suggests that the shaft down which Alice is descending is profoundly deep and that the character is now in a forsaken, confined space. In another instance in the film, Alice follows the disturbing sound of a crying baby, only to discover it is, in fact, a squealing piglet wrapped in blanket. Švankmajer often creates juxtapositions with sound and imagery to create ironic and bizarre scenery. The dissonance that Švankmajer creates with sound is a distinguished characteristic of his work and has been a fundamental element in evoking tension.

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[30] The 'frame rate' refers to the number of frames that will be showcased per second when the final film is played. The human eye can only see 24 frames per second, thus by reducing or increasing the number of frames the animator can manipulate the viewer's perception of time, speed and gravity.

[31] Foley is the reproduction of everyday sound effects that are added in post-production to enhance the quality of audio for films, television, video, video games and radio (Stinson 1999:1).

According to Thomson, disharmony has been the most consistent characteristic of the grotesque, and can be referred to as a form of conflict, a fusion of the heterogeneous, or the conflation of unequal things (1972: 20). It is significant that this disharmony has been seen not only in the filmmaking techniques that Švankmajer pursues, but also in the response it produces amongst an audience. In addition, such qualities of the grotesque are also explored in my own work where, as this chapter revealed at the hand of the film *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011), the very idea of rational and stable space, time and subjectivity is questioned and subverted.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been concerned with an investigation of how the grotesque can be facilitated through the medium of stop motion puppetry. I have argued that the grotesque can be manifested in stop motion puppetry through two interdependent means; firstly, through the selection and arrangement of materials when creating a puppet, and secondly, in the representation of human or animal life through the stop motion method.

From the outset of this thesis, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body provided an important foundation for uncovering characteristics of the grotesque in the puppets used in Jan Švankmajer's *Something from Alice* (1988) and a selected film from my own work *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Wolfgang Kayser's theory of the grotesque also provided a means to understand the distortion and manipulation of objects, time, space and movement in the stop motion animation process.

This thesis explores the meaning of the grotesque and how it has been manifested in forms of puppetry. The shifting connotations of the term 'grotesque', from its origin to its current use, revealed its complex and multifaceted nature. Jan Švankmajer's stop motion film *Something from Alice* (1988) reveals how the grotesque puppet can be used to suggest life by using the stop motion animation process. As I discussed, the juxtaposition of Švankmajer's method of 'tangible absurdity' with Lewis Carroll's illogical, dreamlike narrative provides the viewer with the unique opportunity to experience a powerful and enduring dream in an attentive state. An analysis of *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011) provides a personal reflection on the grotesque deployment of objects in the creation of puppet bodies. An analysis of the objects and materials used in making functional body parts for the puppets used in my film demonstrates how objects can be utilised in the creation of grotesque characters.

The thesis further concentrated on the technical aspect of the stop motion medium and the multiple deconstructive processes the animator draws on to represent biological life through inanimate objects. As demonstrated, Kayser's theory of the grotesque as a site for destruction and distortion can be identified in the animation processes used for both *Something from Alice* (1988*)* and *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011).   In stop motion animation, such forms of distortion/destruction are evident in the processes that mark the combined effort of the maker (who works on the level of objects), the animator (who works with the distortion of time and

48

space) and the live-actor or puppet (who is subjected to the distortion of movement) – all of which contribute to the complex, enchanting nature of the stop motion process. As Švankmajer poignantly argues:

> Use animation as a magical operation. Animation isn't about making inanimate objects move, it is about bringing them to life. Before you bring an object to life, try to understand it first...People touched them in different situations, while acting under various emotions, and they imprinted onto them these different mental states. If you want to disclose some of these hidden aspects of objects through your camera, you need to listen. (cited in Hames 2008: 142)

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. George Méliés, *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 09:16, Star-Film, France [Online] Available: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_FrdVdKlxUk [2013, Aug. 18].

Figure 2. George Méliés, *The Impossible Voyage* (1904). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 07:56, Star-Film, France [Online] Available: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_g_yqDsXD4M [2013, Aug. 18].

Figure 3. Jan Švankmajer, *Something from Alice* (1988). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film, 47:56. Hessischer Rundfunk, Czechoslovakia [Online] Available: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095715/?ref_=nm_knf_i2 [2013, Aug. 13].

Figure 4. Jan Švankmajer, *Something from Alice* (1988). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 52:12. Hessischer Rundfunk, Czechoslovakia [Online] Available: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095715/?ref_=nm_knf_i2 [2013, Aug. 13].

Figure 5. Jan Švankmajer, *Something from Alice* (1988). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 37:38. Hessischer Rundfunk, Czechoslovakia [Online] Available: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095715/?ref_=nm_knf_i2 [2013, Aug. 13].

Figure 6. Jan Švankmajer, *Something from Alice* (1988). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 03:88. Hessischer Rundfunk, Czechoslovakia [Online] Available: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095715/?ref_=nm_knf_i2 [2013, Aug. 13].

Figure 7. *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 01:34,
 Yesterfang Puppetry & Animation, Trompsburg.

Figure 8. *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 02:16, Yesterfang Puppetry & Animation, Trompsburg.

Figure 9. *Kakebeenwa en Dolosse* (1983). Animal bones and String. Collection: Willem Prinsloo Agricultural Museum, Pretoria. [Online] Available: http://safari.viawias.com/willemp.html [2013, Aug. 15].

Figure 10. Jan Švankmajer, *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film, 04:29. Hessischer Rundfunk, Czechoslovakia [Online] Available: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095715/?ref_=nm_knf_i2 [2013, Aug. 13].

Figure 11. Jan Švankmajer, *Something from Alice* (1988). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 05:36. Hessischer Rundfunk, Czechoslovakia [Online] Available: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095715/?ref_=nm_knf_i2 [2013, Aug. 13].

Figure 12. *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film, 01:52, Yesterfang Puppetry & Animation, Trompsburg.

Figure 13. *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 01:42, Yesterfang Puppetry & Animation, Trompsburg.

Figure 14. *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 02:44, Yesterfang Puppetry & Animation, Trompsburg.

Figure 15. *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 01:17, Yesterfang Puppetry & Animation, Trompsburg.

Figure 16. *Bad Man He Comin'* (2011). Screenshot of a Stop Motion Film. 00:46 Yesterfang Puppetry & Animation, Trompsburg.

ADDENDUM A