

Unsettling Touch and Aversion to Manipulation:

An Analysis of Tactility and Physical Experience in Jan Švankmajer's *Dimensions of Dialogue*

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ABSTRACT: The “film body” as outlined by film theorist Jennifer Barker, explains the idea that a film is not just an object to be viewed, but a subject to be experienced. In the world of animation film, there have been many filmmakers that treat their film as its own body due to the tedious nature of self-figuration, which is to allow the filmmaker’s own body to be known and acknowledged within the film¹. Jennifer Barker’s theory for the “film body” outlines perfectly the feelings and emotions expressed through Jan Švankmajer’s work in claymation. While his entire filmography in claymation exhibits a personal and unique feeling to the viewer, his short film *Dimensions of Dialogue*² captures three different types of tactility. The tactility he represents in the three divisions (“dialogues”) of this short film works to provoke a tactile response in the viewer that in turn forces association of this physical response to unique feelings. These dialogues each serve to engage in the very personal and intimate nature of the vast range of human dialogue and discourse. The film abuses familiar objects, sounds, and clay to invoke a tactile response in the viewer that allows them to further occupy and relate to the purpose of each dialogue. Švankmajer’s ability to engage a physical response in the viewer creates a unique form of storytelling that posits the film as both an instrument and a corporeal experience.

KEYWORDS: Claymation, Filmography, Film Theory, Film, Jennifer Barker, Jan Svankmajer, Dimensions of Dialogue, Surrealism

¹ Lin, “The Interface,” 269-270.

² Švankmajer, “Dimensions of Dialogue.”

It can be said that although inventive and impressive, the majority of film animation does not exhibit any tactile experience within the viewer, being for the most part in the mainstream either drawn or computer generated. Within clay animation—also known as claymation, the artist or director is able to create an image of perceived three-dimensionality, satisfying the viewer’s quest and obsession for realism within the world of animation. Clay animation is itself a unique form of animation that falls under the style of stop motion animation, involving the manipulation of physical clay in a frame-by-frame style,³ which can provoke an intense experiential reaction with the viewer. Czech filmmaker and surrealist animator Jan Švankmajer manages to create his own distinct auteurist vision within the rather characteristic field of claymation by manipulating food, objects, and using self-figuration—the filmmaker’s act of inserting and acknowledging their body within their own film.⁴ The tactility and visceral nature of Švankmajer’s work, specifically in *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982), his series of animated shorts⁵, matches Jennifer Barker’s exploration of the physical experience of a film body; Barker’s tactility focuses on the film’s body and the tendency for the film to be “at the same time the subject of experience and the object for experience.”⁶ I will argue that Švankmajer’s unique approach to claymation in *Dimensions of Dialogue* (from now on referred to as *Dimensions*) exploits Jennifer Barker’s theory of tactility within film through manipulation and self-figuration and creates a film body that the viewer can viscerally experience and relate to outside of the film.

Jennifer Barker’s “Film Body”

In order to analyze *Dimensions* and its relation to tactility and touch, I would first like to introduce Jennifer Barker’s theory of the film body and its subsequent influence on the physical experience of film. Traditional tactility is of course known primarily in the context of physicality and actual tangency of touch between people and objects, detailing an expression of intimacy and relationship of contact that can be felt and experienced by the parties involved.⁷ When speaking of cinematic tactility then, it may seem inconsistent or paradoxical to refer to the experience of touch within the film viewer; cinema is at first glance a viewing focused activity with no relation

to physicality. The very essence of the term “viewer” is the lack of physical tangibility. Yet Barker argues that cinematic tactility, in the same vein as traditional tactility, is able to invoke a physical experience of intimacy and relation in the viewer through the film, arguing that the film’s body initiates a reciprocity between itself and the viewer’s body.⁸ This film body is what is able to create such a visceral response in the viewer. Barker defines this body to be both independent of and engaged with the viewer’s and the filmmaker’s lived bodies.⁹ It is a cinematic lived-body capable of its own transgression of emotion and tactility independent of the emotions and physicality of its creators and subjects. In this way, both the film’s body and the viewer’s body are engaged in the emotion and physicality of the film: “[they] share certain ways of being in, seeing, and grasping the world, despite their vast differences.”¹⁰ Tactility then can be felt and expressed both by the film body and the viewer in the same ways, creating a reciprocal relationship of contact and intimacy which allows the viewer to actually physically experience the film through tactility.

In the case of Švankmajer’s *Dimensions*, the over-emphasis on physicality and touch with the manoeuvring of clay and objects creates a film body with an intense affinity to the viewer’s physicality. In this way, Švankmajer is able to portray the intricacies and complexities of human discourse through haptic devices that travel through the screen and manifest experientially in the viewer. As Ewan Wilson argues, “[Švankmajer’s] focus on the surfaces of his materials forces his viewers to imagine the sensation of touching them.”¹¹ *Dimensions* is a body exhibiting an intense reciprocal haptic relationship, reminding the viewer of the densities of dialogue through the experience of physical tactility.

All together, *Dimensions* is an exercise in the exploitation of subjective experience, whether that be the creation of aversion or relation to the objects Švankmajer uses. The filmmaker states that “[w]hile touching, we project a sensation outwardly, outside of us; at the same time we perceive it subjectively, on our skin.”¹² This outward sensation combined with the subjective perception manifests itself as an experience of which we can draw upon when watching his films.

³ Kawakami, “Manipulation,” 82.

⁴ Lin, “The Interface,” 269-270.

⁵ Švankmajer, “Dimensions of Dialogue.”

⁶ Barker, “Introduction: Eye Contact,” 8.

⁷ Barker, 3.

⁸ Barker, 3.

⁹ Barker, 7-8.

¹⁰ Barker, 8.

¹¹ Wilson, “Diagrams of Motion,” 151.

¹² Švankmajer, *Touching and Imagining*, 2.

The manipulation and exploitation of these experiences allows the audience to genuinely identify with the filmmaking process and the film's body, which better familiarizes them with the intentions behind the film. In their analysis of Švankmajer's works, Kawakami states that "[the viewers] are forced to see significantly vivid textures of objects while also being acutely aware of the editing manipulations that construct the scene."¹³ In this way, the film body of *Dimensions* makes the viewer aware of its process which increases relatability through the destabilization of their own physical experience with the objects presented. This in turn permits the viewer to both physically and emotionally relate to the contents of the film and their subsequent manipulation—the themes of the intricacies and complexities of dialogue and the ensuing frustration are experienced both mentally and physically. Each dialogue in *Dimensions* is representative of this physical experience, and while all three comment upon the nuance of human discourse, the intricate ways in which each short is constructed gives the viewer different tactile experiences that match their thematic purposes.

Eternal Conversation

In *Dimensions'* first short entitled "Eternal Conversation" ("Dialog Věčný"), three groups of objects—food, office supplies, and kitchen supplies—are positioned and animated as human heads in, as Wilson notes, an Arcimboldian fashion.¹⁴ Each head takes turns in devouring the others until ultimately all three are reduced to indistinguishable grey copies in an endless loop of regurgitation.¹⁵ In her article examining Švankmajer's haptic devices, Vasseleu details this affinity as a sort of tactile memory, stating "[Švankmajer] is fascinated by the memories that physical objects contain by virtue of their enduring material existence."¹⁶ In other words, the objects he uses in his films, especially in *Dimensions*, give off an experiential quality to them before they are even manipulated—the viewer is familiar to the touch and feel of the food, kitchen tools, and office supplies. Thus, when manipulated in Švankmajer fashion, we are able to subsequently understand and have a visceral reaction to the unconventional usage of these objects. As the heads devour each other in this first short, Švankmajer closes in on specific objects overtaking others, such as pliers crushing sugar cubes and scissors and cutlery dismantling cooked chicken.

Within these close-ups, Švankmajer makes sure to emphasize the harshness in which the objects collide and the resultant disorder of the attacked party. Specifically, when the already-attacked chicken encounters a book from the office supplies head, the pieces of meat slide across and rip apart the pages until the book is unreadable and visibly damaged.¹⁷ Barker's physical tactility is present in the recognition of how both the chicken and the book feel separately, and thus the collision of such an unconventional pairing invokes an unsettling sense with the viewer. Imagining the feel of these two objects together in the same context is definitely absurd, as traditionally and experientially, this pairing would never interact in such a way. This causes the viewer's resultant physical aversion. The chicken leaves grease stains on the pages, invoking a familiarity of cooked chicken grease—a realistic tactility that allows the viewers to tap into their subjective experience and ultimately physically reminds them of greasy food and its inherent messiness. Švankmajer continues with this chain of destructive pairings until all items that were once identifiable are turned completely into unrecognizable mush and eventually into clay.¹⁸ Feeling the destruction of these objects induces what Kristoffer Noheden describes as the imagination of touch, noting how "Švankmajer found that touch has the capability to not only transmit information but also induce analogical associations."¹⁹ That is the tactile memory of these objects are already engrained within the viewer through subjective experience, and the exploitation of these memories—the reduction to indistinct clay heads from tangible whole objects—invokes a disturbing feeling. The nature of these "conversations" between the heads works mostly to perturb the viewer, reinforcing the eternal nature of dialogue through this manipulation of once distinguishable objects. All thoughts and discourse become melded into one, without the ability to differentiate what was so discernable to begin with, both within this "conversation" and tangibly for the viewer. This distressing film body characterizes Švankmajer's thematic intentions of a dialogue that never ends, displaying the "Eternal Conversation" as one in which continuous discourse ultimately ends in singularity, no matter how distinctive it begins.

¹³ Kawakami, "Manipulation," 81.

¹⁴ Wilson, "Diagrams of Motion," 154.

¹⁵ Švankmajer, "Dimensions of Dialogue."

¹⁶ Vasseleu, "Tactile Animation," 155.

¹⁷ Švankmajer, "Dimensions of Dialogue."

¹⁸ Švankmajer, "Dimensions of Dialogue."

¹⁹ Noheden, "The imagination of touch."

Exhaustive Discussion

The final dialogue, “Exhaustive Discussion” (“Dialog V yčerpávající”) shows two clay heads as they present each other with different household objects using their mouths to create unconventional combinations that ultimately lead to indistinct chaotic pairings.²⁰ The irregular pairings in this dialogue exhibit a similar sense of confusion and unsettling tactility as the objects in the first dialogue. However, the physical experience in the viewer does not come from the destruction of said objects but rather from the combining of them. It is incredibly frustrating to watch two objects that should never interact connect in the way Švankmajer makes them. This frustration comes from the aforementioned memory and familiarity with objects and their functions, which Švankmajer blatantly disregards again for thematic purposes. Barker’s tactility is evidently apparent when the objects are paired with anything other than their respective accurate partners, creating a visceral response manifested by the viewer’s aversion. At the beginning, shoes are paired with laces, butter is paired with toast, and so on.

By the end, no pairing is correct and the clay heads crack under the pressure of stress, and physical repulsion is expressed as a result.²¹ This tactile disgust is exemplified perfectly in the pairing of the pencil sharpener and the toothpaste. The chaos and messiness of the toothpaste leaking through the sharpener and the plastic being shredded²² feels completely wrong due to our familiarity of both objects being separated. There is a repulsive quality to the mess created by the marrying of these two objects. This physical repulsion, alongside the platform of grotesque clay tongues, compliments the narrative of exhaustion in miscomprehension as this “dialogue” between the heads is incredibly frustrating to experience.

The different onomatopoeic sound pairings work to enhance the visceral nature of the objects as well, with different noises associated with each of the different objects. Of course, the sounds match up phonetically when objects are paired correctly. Thus, just as the viewers are already deeply unsettled with the forced unsuccessful pairings, the accompanying sounds create an even more chaotic atmosphere to the environment which further frustrates the viewer. All together,

as the sounds, objects, and their paired collisions become increasingly unsatisfying, Švankmajer is able to create a physical recoiling in the viewer due to this obvious subversion. The physical reaction is one of an intense sensory overload. Yet, this is of course exactly how Švankmajer wishes the viewer to react, forcing a conclusion of continuous discourse as frustrating and tiresome. Švankmajer is asking the viewer how long this discourse can continue exasperatingly until both parties are completely broken. That is to say, “Exhaustive Dialogue” reaches its meaning through tactility; it is frustrating to watch the dialogue due to the distressing nature of its tactility. These two shorts in *Dimensions* accurately exemplify Švankmajer’s attraction towards the manipulated familiarity of objects and the experiential memory associated with their purposes and intents.

Passionate Discourse

Švankmajer’s self-figuration is another way in which he is able to use animation to elicit a physical intimacy in his viewers. This is most prominent in his second dialogue, “Passionate Discourse” (“Dialog Vášnivý”). It depicts a sexual encounter between two clay figures resulting in the birth of an inarticulate clay blob, sending the two clay figures into an abstract quarreled frenzy, where they become one messy unit of clay.²³ Whereas the other two dialogues exhibit an intense frustration with the familiarity and subjective experience of manipulated objects, this second dialogue focuses on the intimacy of touch and its dismantling through clay figuration. The filmmaker’s touch is incredibly apparent in this section of *Dimensions*, as the fingerprints and claw marks appearing on the two figures offer the main source of tactility within the “Passionate Discourse” film body. As the two figures approach each other, physical imprints representative of Švankmajer’s own hands sculpting the clay meld the two bodies together, ultimately culminating in a cesspool of prints and movements. Emerging from the boiling clay are fragmented physical creations of this sexual encounter, such as an extended head in apparent orgasm and a figuration of a vagina and breasts. Not only do these figurations contribute to a three-dimensional realism in the figures and their encounter, but the movement of molding and pressing the clay is easy to physically imagine with our own hands.

²⁰ Švankmajer, “Dimensions of Dialogue.”

²¹ Švankmajer, “Dimensions of Dialogue.”

²² Švankmajer, “Dimensions of Dialogue.”

²³ Švankmajer, “Dimensions of Dialogue.”

Towards the end, as the lovers are in an intense quarrel, the clay is manhandled rather forcefully, with visible claw marks and indents—much harsher and much less intricate than the encounter minutes earlier.²⁴ In this way, Švankmajer exploits the viewer's experience with clay and matter of this kind. Just as Barker explains the sharing of texture between the viewer and the film,²⁵ the viewer can physically feel the clay in their nails and between their fingers. At first it is gentle and soft, just as the sexual encounter is, but by the end there is no rhyme or reason behind each blow and the cruel handling becomes quite unsettling to watch.

Ewan Wilson argues that “[t]he same energy that was transferred from the animator's hands to shape the clay, to arrange the utensils, is subsequently employed to crush the figures and, in doing so, makes the force of the blows palpable to the film's audience.”²⁶ That is, the invisible exploiter behind the clay's movements is more apparent, and thus the viewer is able to identify with the force and impact needed to contort this material in the way that it is represented visually. While Švankmajer's hand or physical body is not technically present in *Dimensions*, his influence and touch contribute to the viewer's relation of contact. This extension of the hand of the artist posits the filmmaker in the space of the film, inserting himself into the dynamic between the film body and the viewer's body. In creating a dialogue that allows his own body to be experienced, Švankmajer merges his body with the film body.

While *Dimensions'* first and last dialogues use figures and objects to invoke a sense of recognition and tactility in the viewer, this second dialogue uses Švankmajer's body to do the same. Švankmajer's presence works to invoke a personal connection to the tactile experience, as along with recognizing how objects interact, there is an intimate experience of relating directly to the filmmaker's own tactility. Rather than create such an aversion towards his images, Švankmajer's touch in “Passionate Discourse” forces the viewer to physically experience this intensity between two lovers intimately through his own hands. Being able to figure the different movements and creations allows the viewer to understand and feel the gravity of each movement and figuration of the clay; we can imagine manipulating and fashioning the clay with our own hands due to the obvious markings of Švankmajer's own hands. “Passionate Discourse” is sensual and private, and the intimacy felt through the filmmaker works simply to enhance the recognition to this affectionate and personal nature of the dialogue. This marrying of the filmmaker's, the film's, and the viewer's bodies creates an experience in tactility that manifests itself as a physical experience of touch and as a thematic narrative, both of which are equally enhanced by the other.



²⁴ Švankmajer, “Dimensions of Dialogue.”

²⁵ Barker, “Introduction: Eye Contact,” 2.

²⁶ Wilson, “Diagrams of Motion,” 151.

²⁷ Barker, “Introduction: Eye Contact,” 8

Conclusion

With his unique approach to clay animation using the manipulation of known objects and an abundance of self-figuration, Jan Švankmajer has created his own distinct sub-genre of surrealist claymation which invokes a sense of physical touch and an experience of visceral tactility within the viewer. This physicality experienced by the viewer directly relates to Jennifer Barker's theory of the film body—the film's, filmmaker's, and viewer's bodies work together to create a visceral and tactile response outside of the film. The film body of Švankmajer's *Dimensions of Dialogue* exploits viewers' subjective experiences of touch through the uncomfortable figuration of clay fingerprints and destruction, alongside the reconfiguration of tangible objects. In this way, viewers are subject to the physical tactility of familiar objects and the clay's texture, making it easier to both understand the thematic dialogue of Švankmajer's series of short films and to interpret that dialogue as unsettling and complex. Although the intent behind each dialogue can be configured differently and subjectively by each individual viewer, it is apparent that the themes and narrative are experienced physically through tactile and haptic means and are felt through the film body's "modes of embodied existence."²⁷



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