
Adorned Shadows and Rebellious Tropes in Jan Švankmajer's *Alice*

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Abstract

This essay aims to trace subversive pleasures in Jan Švankmajer's *Alice* (Něco z Alenky, 1988) and their revolutionary potential residing within densely saturated atmospheres of aesthetic expression. It will be explored, how poetic-analytical notions such as 'adorned shadows' and 'subversive pleasures' serve to describe expressive dramas and intensities and how their very material as well as abstract nature facilitates the possibility of social and political change. In order to elaborate this claim, the paper will draw extensively on Antonin Artaud's 'metaphysics of expression,' Paul Ricœur's notion of mimesis, Vivian Sobchack's view on interobjectivity, and Gilles Deleuze's conception of the event. The approach is experimental. Poetic and analytical language inspire each other to unfold and indulge within, in between, on / of the powerlessness to think and the fragility of sense – an erotics of interpretation toward the expressible and expressed in Švankmajer's remarkable interpretation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Introduction

*To write is certainly not to impose a form (of expression) on the matter of lived experience.*¹

Jan Švankmajer's well-known *Alice* (also known as *Something from Alice*, *Něco z Alenky*, 1988, 84 min.) is all about language, about expression.² Cinematic, theatrical, literary, pictorial, sensual languages merge endlessly and restlessly into one another, flaring up and taking down curved and flattened cascades of meaning and architectures of desire. This is true for most of the director's fascinating work, whose language is 'weak', born out of the desire for the powerlessness and inferiority of thought, looking subtly for a way out of the unbearable.³

Švankmajer's films do not 'impose' language, expression and meaning. They unearth expression, carve it out, draw it out of lived and livable experience – lure it, hide it, fail it. The cinematic language of *Alice* moves obsessively, erratically, aberrantly – from behind / beneath primordial, ritualised grounds – through the rhythmic, fragmented, embodied, passionate breath of expression and desire – towards the fragile, aloft planes of sense and thought (see Picture 9, 'Planes').

1 Gilles Deleuze, Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, "Literature and Life," *Critical Inquiry*, 23 (1997) 2: 225-230, 225.

2 Language is understood here hermeneutic-phenomenologically, supposing expression as bordering symbolically on experience. The construction and deconstruction of meaning (hermeneutics) is motivated by the epistemological desire to (self) knowledge and enfolded and obliterated in the embodied experience of lived and livable experience (phenomenology). Language is always already given in experience, even if this experience is ambiguous, giving rise to interpretation. "One speaks a language that is never fully one's own [...] [L]anguage gains its temporal life only in and through the utterances that reinvolve and restructure the conditions of its own possibility" Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), 140. See also Don Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971).

3 See Deleuze on Artaud in: Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, transl. H Tomlinson and R Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1994 [1985]), 167-170. This passage will be discussed in more detail later in the essay.

Alice's journey in the film re-traces this erratic movement between deep levels of folded, ritualised, masochistic pains and pleasures, to cracked surfaces of sense making processes – moments of powerlessness of thought tempting with the fragility of sense. Is it possible to tentatively move towards these textures in the film text? Any film analytical approach might do that. Yet, this reading would like to propose an experimental approach. What happens if you merge lyrical and analytical language, presupposing that poetic language might produce different resonances and fragile meanings as analytical (im-)positions? While the analytical approach highlights the quest for (self-)knowledge, the lyrical advance emphasises resonances in the aberrations, excesses, failures and deviations. As Susan Sontag famously asserts in *Against Interpretation*, cinema appears to be the art form most alive and exciting for the "latitude it gives for making mistakes [...], and still being good."⁴ Thus, good film criticism implies, on Sontag's account:

[T]o recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more. Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.⁵

Merging lyrical with analytical language intends to move towards such a recovery of senses, a recovery that culminates in eroticism: "In place of hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."⁶ To do this, erotics and hermeneutics are explored in dialectical tension to each other, as the fragility of sense and thought seem central to Švankmajer's *Alice*. This reading does not offer and secure (descriptive) contents, but proposes weakened, falsified, denigrated contents, irritated and possessed in eroticised content: *weakened sense*.⁷ A collage of pictorial, literary and lyrical views is offered (text fragments, pictures and poems seaming, besieging, and invading the analytical body of the text) that intends to address and resonate with the ritualised, erotised, passionate aspect of the fragility of sense of *Alice*. Respectively, the analytic-epistemological side engages with weakened concepts of theory: of theoretical approaches that understand languages and terms innately as subject to 'falsehood' and 'becoming'.⁸ The work

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,
Lewis Carroll

[S]he came upon a low curtain she had not noticed before, and behind it was a little door about fifteen inches high: she tried the little golden key in the lock, and to her great delight it fitted!

Alice opened the door and found that it led into a small passage, not much larger than a rat-hole: she knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest garden you ever saw. How she longed to get out of that dark hall, and wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cold fountains, but she could not even get her head through the doorway; 'and even if my head would go through,' thought poor Alice, 'it would be of very little use without my shoulders. Oh, how I wish I could shut up like a telescope! I think I could, if I only knew how to begin.' For, you see, so many out-of-the-way things had happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible. [...]

4 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 2001 [1966]), 11.

5 *Ibid.*, 14.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Propose, possess, and offer – much used analytical phrases – resonate strongly in this dialogue between lyrical and analytical language. The fragility of sense becomes quite palpable in relation to these terms, as will become clear.

8 See: Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, transl. P. Patton (London: Continuum, 2001 [1968]) and Gregory Flaxman, *Gilles Deleuze and the Fabulation of Philosophy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

of Gilles Deleuze comes to mind, but also the writings of Antonin Artaud (theatre of cruelty), Paul Ricœur (mimesis) and Vivian Sobchack (interobjectivity) will be referred to in this context.

Fragile sense(s): sense and erotics

Poetic / analytical terms – indefinitely folding and folded *within* and *by / of* the ever erratic, erring movements of transformation and translation of the film – take the centre-stage in this:

<i>I am full</i>	adorned shadows	
I am full of lips	irrational concrete	
and limbs	grotesque beauty	
and legs	material ghosts	
and bones,	fragile sense	
and stone.	symbolic aggression	
	subversive pleasures.	
I roam the world, full of stars, amazement and wonder, weak and sharp!	The list is by no means exhaustive and it will not be possible to discuss all of the terms in depth. This should be done elsewhere, especially in relation to the rich historical and cultural implications of these terms. ⁹ Here, the emphasis lies on the first and the last, as the title of the paper suggests – <u>adorned shadows and subversive pleasure</u> – leaving the others to resonate and fold <i>in between</i> , <i>within</i> and <i>by / of</i> the saturated atmosphere of the film and its discussion.	Antonin Artaud Preface Every real effigy has a shadow which is its double; and art must falter and fail from the moment the sculptor believes he has liberated the kind of shadow whose very existence will destroy his repose.
A crocked spine feeble bones, delicately rugged like corral stone...	Why these terms, where do they come from? Is it their paradoxical bearing, drawing together the unthinkable and the unbearable? Is it the poetic / symbolic depth that they hold and fail? This is certainly the case. As <i>Denkfiguren</i> , figures of thought, they resonate <i>in between</i> , <i>within</i> and <i>on / of</i> a variety of artistic and critical subtexts – indefinitely folding scenes, gestures, acts, scenarios, etc. into one another. They map out subtle dramas and conflicts, which are deeply erotic and meaningful in a fragile sense – destructive and healing, regressive and predicative, unknown and familiar. ¹⁰	

9 The historical and cultural context in mind refers to the artistic and critical legacy of Surrealism and Dada, especially French and Czech traditions. Other points of reference might include vaudeville, *commedia dell' arte*, and puppet theatre, as much as radical philosophy and political-artistic activism.

10 See: Gilles Deleuze, "The Method of Dramatization," *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974*, ed. D. Lapoujade, transl. M. Taormina (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2004 [1969]), 94-114, 108: "Gilles Deleuze: I will try to define dramatization more rigorously: what I have in mind are dynamisms,

To understand such figures of thought means to understand the conflict that rages *in between, within* and *on / of* them; or at least try to understand it. You must not simply give in to the passion, though this is the most important first step in, eroticise your thinking. You must not simply subdue to their destructive and healing 'weak' force, in order to expel and exorcise the demons and touch their improbable souls – masochistic pleasures and pains. In order to understand the fragility of sense, you turn to the *effects of the attributes*, stirring and touching the unbearable souls of the substantives: *adorned* shadows, *irrational* concrete, *grotesque* beauty, *material* ghosts, *fragile* sense, *symbolic* aggression, *subversive* pleasures, etc. The intolerable 'substance' is exorcised (regression, destruction) and lured onto new grounds (healing, predication). *In between, within* and *on / of* this stirring and touching of attributes something amazing happens (event), utterly erotic and meaningful at the same time. As Deleuze points out in *The Logic of Sense*, the attributes are very different to the actions and passions of the body, but they most importantly draw attention to the *causes and effects, happening in between, within* and *on / of them, drawing sense and passion indefinitely together (drama / fragility of sense)*:

The fragility of sense can easily be explained. The attribute has an entirely different nature than the actions and passions of the body. But it results from them, since sense is the effect of corporal causes and their mixture.¹¹

Sense is tied to the actions and passions of the body, subdued to their mixture and bearing in terms of cause and effect. The *working of meaning through* the actions and passions of the body – subduing it to the body's dramas, conflicts, sorrows, failures, pains, desires, sickness, pleasures, joys, healing – marks it palpably fragile, effaces its surfaces, folds it, encloses it, sieves it through, swallows it, batters it, fails it. We want to understand the *drama in between, within* and *on / of* the figures of expression, their origins and bearings, their destructive forcefulness and healing tenderness, their passionate rebellion and sickening exhaustion – all between the effaced surfaces of the body and the collapsed surfaces of sense.

Symbolic aggression: the powerlessness to think

Fragile sense or 'weak' meaning that reaches between the effaced surface of the body and the collapsed surface of sense looks for cause and effect relation, but in a re-discovered, re-newed sense: a re-sensualised, re-eroticised sense that passionately

...The inside of the
breast
finely spun fast
coldly covered
with iron brass.

The weft of skin
sharply flung sweet
with the fringed edge
of the wild bleeding
beat.

Look at this mess,
at this turmoil,
and maze.
My head is like a flame,
no room to waste.

dynamic spacio-temporal determinations, that are pre-qualitive and pre-extensive, taking "place" in intensive systems where differences are distributed at different depth, whose patients are larval subjects and whose "function" is to actualize Ideas...".

11 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. C. V. Boundas, transl. M. Lester with C. Stivale (London: Athlone Press, 1990 [1969]), 94.

falls back onto bodies and mingles with their sonorous elements, with the body's olfactory, gustatory and digestive affects.¹² Švankmajer's version of *Alice* excessively draws on this tension between collapsed surface and passionately falling back onto the schizophrenic body. Alice continuously changes her appearance and size, rapidly moving between a puppet body and the body of a little girl:

As there is no surface, the inside and the outside, the container and the contained no longer have a precise limit [...]. Hence, the schizophrenic manner of living the contradiction: either in the deep fissure, which traverses the body, or in the fragmented parts, which encase one another and spin about. Body sieve, fragmented body and dissociated body – these are the three primary dimensions of the schizophrenic body.¹³

With the collapse of the surface, meaning is lost. However in this, the vague idea of a 'shared thought' or rather a 'shared' approach to 'thought' presses through: the powerlessness to think. This paradox is quite palpable in *Alice*. Expression violently imprints on the matter of lived experience, without ever touching it. Thought emphatically presses and transforms through countless forms, figures, metaphors, plots, shapes, without ever really adopting any. The film presents a cinematic as a literary, a dramatic as a pictorial / tactile homage to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, tentatively reckoning with its strange and beautiful characters and breath-taking world of wonders: a world of expressive and excessive *becoming*. Peter Hames points out:

The original title of the film, *Something from Alice*, indicates that the film was never intended as an 'adaptation' of the novel but is an interpretation 'fermented' by his own childhood 'with all its particular obsessions and anxieties'.¹⁴

The process of expressive / excessive 'fermentation' or indeed, translation, subdues the means, characters and settings of the original story to a series of symbolic acts of aggression (effacing the surface, collage, submerged *in / on / of* the faceless, schizophrenic body) that renders Švankmajer's version obsessively violent. Alice's surreal dream encounters with White Rabbit, Frog Footman, the Hatter, the March Hare and the Caterpillar are explicitly more threatening in Švankmajer's version and this violence harks back, as Hames emphasises, to childhood memories and the expressiveness of early films.

Yet, there is more to it. The infuriating succession (surface) of symbolic acts of violence (depth) does not simply reflect on the filmmaker's personal life, his memories and experiences, investing regressively the film's language with psychoanalytic and pathologic subtexts. While it is certainly true that the expressivity of the film replicates the personal neurotic and schizophrenic obsessions of Švankmajer, with

¹² *Ibid.*, 91.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁴ Peter Hames, *Czech and Slovak Cinema. Theme and Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 179.

manifold references to perverted food and excessive tactility,¹⁵ regression is not the sole driving force of the film's expressivity:

The symbolic aggression is, according to Švankmajer's own admission, a form of protection, a cathartic and ritual ceremony, charged with distancing the demons, internal fears and intimate terrors (which are often substrata coming from childhood) and seeking to master them by externalising and naming them. But this conflict in its symbolic forms goes beyond a simple return of the repressed and latches onto more universal plays of forces and energies that also need to be known, named and mastered.¹⁶

The re-enactment of intimate conflicts and dramas in *Alice* reaches beyond personal feelings and experiences. Becoming aware of the symbolic dimension of intimate dramas opens the eyes and senses towards primordial, initial, mythological conflicts that move in / through symbolic acts of violence: acts of breaking away radically.

Nobody understood this better than Antonin Artaud. For Artaud, the 'metaphysics' of expression implies re-tracing and re-enacting symbolic acts of violence that give way to concrete, re-sensualised forms of expression. As Artaud describes the experience of a fire in a painting in *Metaphysics and the Mise en Scene*:

There is [...] something frighteningly energetic and troubling in the way the painter depicts this fire, like an element still active and in motion, yet with an immobilized expression. It matters little how this effect is obtained, it is real; it is enough to see the canvas to be convinced of it.¹⁷

This fire is a shadow of its own, yet, as it is able to convince the canvas of its destructive nature, it *acts* destructive and troubling in a very real, fragile sense. *How* this impression is enforced on the canvas / viewer matters little (in terms of means). The persuasiveness (hermeneutics) lies *within* and *on / of* the painterly expressiveness of the scene (phenomenology), expelling a concrete, sensual language beyond conventional language, a language of shadows:

'For the theatre as for culture, the question remains that of naming and directing shadows.' These forces in conflict, these shadows are equally those that govern, act, transform

15 See Bertrand Schmitt, "Detailed Biography with commentary (II) 1971-1989," *Jan Švankmajer: Dimensions of Dialogue / Between Film and Fine Art*, ed. F. Dryje, B. Schmitt (Prague: Arbor Vitae, 2012), 121-194; Bertrand Schmitt, "Detailed Biography with commentary (III) 1990-2012," Jan Švankmajer: *Dimensions of Dialogue / Between Film and Fine Art*, ed. F. Dryje, B. Schmitt (Prague: Arbor Vitae, 2012), 323-430; Jan Švankmajer, *Jan Švankmajer: Tansmutace smyslů / Transmutation of the senses* (Prague: Středoevropská galerie a nakladatelství, 1994); Jan Švankmajer, *Touching and Imagining: An introduction to tactile art*. (London: Tauris, 2014).

16 Bertrand Schmitt, "Return to origins. The setting of King Stag," *Jan Švankmajer: Dimensions of Dialogue / Between Film and Fine Art*, ed. F. Dryje, B. Schmitt (Prague: Arbor Vitae, 2012), 23-42, 26.

17 Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, transl. M. C. Richards (Grove Press: New York, 1958 [1938]), 35.

and destroy the world. In this way the opposition and confrontation [...] of the universe are re-enacted through the intimate conflicts and unconscious dramas which, under another form [...] mark individuals.¹⁸

The cosmic and the personal conjoin in symbolic textures and knowledges of conflict, exposing ever changing fragilities of sense(s). Banned and exorcised between consuming depth and fleeting farce, the vague and unrelenting idea of the inferiority and powerlessness to 'think' presses to the fore, cast as shadows to escape language. Deleuze draws to this in *Cinema II*:

It might be said that Artaud turns round Eisenstein's argument: if it is true that thought depends on a shock which gives birth to it (the nerve, the brain matter), it can only think one thing, *the fact that we are not yet thinking*, the powerlessness to think the whole and to think oneself, thought which is always fossilized, dislocated, collapsed. [Emphasis G.D.]¹⁹

Dealing with the Unbearable

Bringing out the powerlessness of thought (language and expression) means drawing out the power of the false, of *becoming*: the invisible, dream, perversion, childhood, madness, etc. Thought is confronted with its own limit, therein initiating unstable zones of interstices, of rites and passage, of erring and derivation, of a subtle way out. The languages of madness and of perversion enable to "open up a kind of foreign language,"²⁰ to create a "non-language (violence that does not speak, eroticism that remains unspoken)."²¹

These vision are not fantasies, but veritable Ideas that the writer sees and hears in the interstices of language, in its intervals. They are not interruptions of the process but breaks that form part of it, like an eternity that can only be revealed in becoming, or a landscape that only appears in movement.²²

The powerlessness of language not simply disrupts power structures, but reveals in the moments of dissociation and dispossession of these languages distanciations of the world and of the self; a way out, a vision that the artist and writer as 'seer' is able to draw out in the interstices of language – the unthinkable in thought:

For it is not in the name of a better or truer world that thought captures the intolerable in this world, but, on the contrary, it is because this world is intolerable that it can no longer think a world or think itself. The intolerable is

18 Schmitt, "Return to origins," 26.

19 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 167.

20 Deleuze, Smith & Greco, "Literature and Life," 230.

21 Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Zone Books, 1991 [1967]), 22.

22 Deleuze, Smith & Greco, "Literature and Life," 230.

no longer a serious injustice, but the permanent state of a daily banality.²³

Reading Švankmajer's *Alice* through terms like adorned shadows and subversive pleasures – to read it through / in the interstices of analytical and poetic languages – aims to engage with the film through the prism of ritualised and symbolic dispossessions and dissociations, distanciations of languages, the world, the self – to intimately touch the film's text in disconcerting expressions of madness and perversion, drawing out the unthinkable and dealing with the unbearable:

To believe, not in a different world, but in a link between man and the world, in love of life, to believe in this as in the impossible, the unthinkable, which none the less cannot but be thought: something possible, otherwise I will suffocate.²⁴

The belief in the power of the false puts the writer and artist in touch with life, with symbolic knowledges of conflict, with the identity of life and thought itself, not in a strong, but a 'weak' and 'fragile' sense. Where everything tumbles, everything trembles. Moving toward the powerlessness of thought means to move toward the power of falsehood, of weakness, of fragility, of exhaustion, of failure, of inferiority, of delicacy, of intricacy, of desire. Moving toward the inferiority of thought means to move toward erotics, toward the re-sensualisation of the body, toward the re-discovery of ritualised and symbolic knowledges. The intimate impulse 'to flip', 'to move' is, indeed, essentially linked to the will to understand, to breathe, to live, to believe – not in order to re-install an all-powerful thought or to re-instate language in a conventional sense, but to explore and discover life and thought through the mad, childish, and perverse joy of dispossessing and disassociating from language and expression. The writer and artist "has seen and heard of things too big for him, too strong for him, suffocating things whose passage exhausts him while nonetheless giving him the becoming that dominant and substantial health [language] would render impossible."²⁵ Psychoanalysing and pathologising instances and impulses of 'perversion' and 'madness' in artistic expression essentially misses the point. Interlacing analytical and poetic language intends to move closer towards this passage and its intimate understanding of life and thought inside / outside thought – the fragility of sense.

Adorned Shadows in *Alice*

Thus, where does the fragility of sense lead us in Švankmajer's *Alice*? The adorned shadows? The violent acts of symbolic aggression? The ever changing surfaces of the collage, split open to embrace the unbearable? The unsettling and funny creatures that Alice encounters in Wonderland are, indeed, reminiscent of adorned shadows: the stuffed White Rabbit, coming to life, dressed in Renaissance style cloth, constantly losing sawdust, restlessly looking at its waistcoat watch, repeatedly mumbling "Oh dear, Oh dear, I'm going to be late!" and carrying a huge pair of scissors; or the rabbit's scull-headed entourage, chimeric reptile, fish and bird-like creatures, dressed like the rabbit in beautiful red gowns (see picture 1-3). Later the same

²³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 170.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Deleuze, Smith & Greco, "Literature and Life" 228.

creatures attack Alice, when she intrudes into the rabbit's house, and punish her by entrapping her in a puppet shaped casket. The rabbit and the chimeric creatures drag her in this demeaning device to a pantry. She starts exploring the food around her: marmalade with pins and bread rolls with nails (see picture 4), perverted food that Alice already had encountered during her fall down the



Picture 1 The White Rabbit



Picture 4 Breadroll with Nails

rabbit hole (in Švankmajer's version an elevator trip down to Wonderland). Similarly puzzling and amusing are Frog Footman, the Hatter, the March Hare and the Caterpillar (see pictures 5-8). The glass eyes that equip most of the creatures endow them with human likeness, albeit grotesquely estranged. The bizarre appearance and mad behaviour of the characters is hostile, dismissive and violent, but also likable and enthusing in the very fact of strangeness. The frenzy of the tea party, for example, is irritating and fascinating, with the tea running down

the puppet's body, as the tea is impossible to ingest for a puppet, the repeated outcry of the Hatter: "I want a clean cup, let's all move round one place!!", a fur licking the tea service clean (the fur representing the Dormouse), or the March Hare coating the Hatter's waistcoat watch with butter. We witness this frenzy with utter amazement and bewilderment and are enthused and appalled by its repetitive patterns and overwhelming strangeness. The same is true for Švankmajer's remarkable interpretation of the Caterpillar (see picture 8). When Alice enters the room, she first encounters wormlike sock-creatures punching holes into the wooden floor. The Caterpillar himself is a sock-creature, too, resting next to a sewing basket. The mushroom he sits on is made of wood. Caterpillar will give two pieces of the mushroom to Alice and explains to her how to use them. This empowers Alice to control her ability to grow and shrink, though she has to eat the wooden pieces in order to obtain this ability. Indeed, the fantastic implications are undercut by the very everydayness of the things and actions involved. These everyday items and actions are invested with a magical, almost anarchic energy: the worm-like creatures that appear and disappear at will and punch the floor



Pictures 2 and 3 The Entourage



Picture 5 Frog Footman



Picture 6 Hatter



Picture 7 March Hare



Picture 8 Caterpillar

until there is nearly no room left, or the needle and thread that stitch up the eyes of the Caterpillar when he wants to rest. There is something very unsettling about this stitching.

Watching Švankmajer's *Alice* means to get absorbed in an atmosphere of suffocation, suspense and breathless wonder. Speaking of adorned shadows in relation to the strange, mad creatures like White Rabbit, Frog Footman, the Hatter, the March Hare and the Caterpillar in *Alice* aims precisely to express this grotesque and bizarre nature of Wonderland: aspiring, deepening, disassociating, and erotising the ever passing and changing surfaces and bodies – abstracting, critically engaging, demeaning, traversing, transcending, collaging – regressing, violently processing, splitting open, pressing through, deepening, furthering, dissociating, collapsing, fragmenting. The adornments, such as the elaborate means of carving, dressing, filming, and arranging (attributes), are means of embellishment, testimonies of careful attention to detail and craftsmanship. Yet, the paint is flaky, the carving outworn, the dress battered: surface split open, effaced and worn beauties. The adornments draw attention to the material side “between grammar and prosody” the here and now of the carnal experience of the ‘presence’ of the shadows and the effects of their actions. They draw attention to the sensibility articulated through rhetorical means – a rhetoric between enthused awe and suffocated will.

Mimesis

Paul Ricœur's notion of mimesis is very interesting in this respect. Ricœur makes it clear that the notion of imitation in art always already highlights the constructed nature of artistic expression in that it draws attention to the distinct character of art and nature. However, this discrepancy does not justify the semiotic attempt to differentiate an *inside* and an *outside* of artistic expression, as in a practical prefiguration and a practical transfiguration.²⁶ Representation stresses in the mimetic means its constructed and composed nature and challenges in this any attempt to draw a (semiotic) line between a secluded inside (text) and an excluded outside (world). In exploring the very means and characters of adornment in *Alice*, in studying the carnal sensibilities raised by the material side and, at the same time, accounting for the trans-material, chimeric side in between grammars, rhetorics, rhythms, prosodies, emotions, myths and intentions of these means of adornment, is to engage hermeneutically with the collapsed distinction between *inside* and *outside*, between text and world. As Ricœur writes:

It is the task of hermeneutics [...] to reconstruct the set of operations by means of which a work rises from the opaque depth of living, acting, suffering, to be given by an author to readers who receive it and thereby change their own actions.²⁷

Dealing with the adorned shadows of *Alice* means addressing the disrupted, collapsed ‘line’ between inside and outside, between reality and dream, between language and the powerlessness to think – how both are *nonetheless and still* linked in the unbearable impossibility to think and live. Embodied perception meeting

²⁶ Paul Ricœur, “Mimesis and representation,” *Annals of scholarship: Metastudies of the humanities and the social sciences* 2 (1981) 3: 15-32, 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

hermeneutics in order to re-trace and re-discover fragile sense(s), delicate linkages and vital bonds that make *believe* and *want* that there is something to live and breathe for in the unbearable: interstices conjoining sense and body, *signum* and *res*, thought and passion. These ‘delicate links’ and ‘vital bonds’ are both known



Picture 9, 'Planes' – primordial, ritualised grounds – rhythmic, fragmented, breath of desire – fragile plane of thought - see also 'Pages' on page 81 at the end of this article.

and new to symbolic knowledges – shared or to be discovered *in between, within, on / of* the symbolic dramas of bodily action and passion – *in between, within, on / of* effaced surfaces and faceless bodies mixing passionately together – poetically / symbolically re-enacted knowledge.

Interobjectivity

The bread rolls with nails in *Alice* (Picture 4) present a ‘weak’ example in this respect, which resonates with the body as much as it does with language. On one level, we make fleshly, bodily sense of this image. Being at the same time edible and inconsumable, the thought of another body actually enduring and desiring ingestion of this adorned object results in an awkward perception tainted by masochistic pleasure and displeasure. This kind of embodied perception, which draws on the (imaginary) bodily exchange between objects and projects, actualises both in the materiality and sense-ability of their shared carnal perception. Vivian Sobchack terms this reversibility inter-objectivity. As Sobchack writes:

What I am here calling interobjectivity is also grounded in the “anonymous existence” and reversibility of the flesh – but its structure is experienced in a mode both complementary and contrary to intersubjectivity. That is, interobjectivity connects us as we anonymously exist with the common matter and potential of materiality that is mutually shared not only by intentional subjects but also by nonintentional objects.²⁸

²⁸ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal thoughts: embodiment and moving image culture* (Berkley, MI & Los Angeles, LA: University of California Press, 2004), 312.

Interobjectively, we engage with the materiality and sense-ability of the object world by projecting “our sense of what it feels like to be objective.”²⁹ Sobchack makes it quite clear that it is impossible for us to perceive the object-body *in-itself*, but rather *for-itself*. In moments, in which we experience objects as non-intentional and indifferent to subjective sense-ability, we rather appear to be understanding that the real and present presence of an object is beyond our means of comprehension. Sensing terms of opacity, inertia and indifference associated with the presence of the object world, we really sense “its *preobjective* status as real, a sense of a presence that is *undifferentiated* for us in its materiality – that is not yet an object and not yet a subject.”³⁰ This pre-symbolic, pre-objective engagement with the material and objective side enables us to perceive others and the world aesthetically and ethically. Sobchack differentiates in this respect suffering and devotion. Passion defined as suffering comprises, according to Sobchack’s view, the capacity of being acted upon. In this, subjects and objects share the ‘material base’ that makes them vulnerable and susceptible to external forces. This shared experience of ‘being essentially material’ that is foregrounded in suffering, interlocks subjective and objective modes of existence and highlights ethical perceptions. As Sobchack writes:

It is this sense of passion as suffering the agency and power of external forces on our lived bodies that provides us the material foundation that primordially grounds the possibility of our ethical behaviour to others and the world. That is, the passion of suffering not only forces recognition of oneself as an objective subject always immanently and substantially “here” and open to being externally acted on regardless of one’s volition – but it also enhances the awareness of oneself as a subjective object: a material being that is nonetheless capable of feeling what it is to be treated only as an object.³¹

In other words, highlighting the awareness of ‘being material’ in the acted upon objective body raises the material and ethical sensibility of the subjective body and interlocks it in the experience of suffering with the objective body. The sequence of stitching up the eyes, when Caterpillar rests, serves as a clear example in this respect. The appalling / enthusing feeling that emerges with this unsettling scene mirrors the thought of an acted upon objective body and the viewer feeling with it and interlocking with it.

This idea of projective exteriorisation that implies ‘becoming’ an object by engaging with it, is even stronger with the notion of devotion, the complementary aspect of suffering. In relation to this, Sobchack writes:

On the other hand, passion is also defined as an active devotion to others and the objective world, as an intense, driving, and overmastering feeling that emerges and expands beyond our conscious will yet acts on us, nonetheless, from within. Thus,

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 316.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 315.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 288.

like suffering, passionate devotion is in excess of our volition;
but unlike suffering, it is within our agency.³²

The passionate aspect of devotion, thus, describes the desire and obsession to self-transform, to enfold, embrace, and displace the other subject's and object's materiality and objectivity in acts of intimacy and transformation, aiming to make the other's alterity one's own. The driving force of devotion is care and appreciation of the other's materiality and objectivity. It aims at sensual and sensible expansion, to broaden the appreciative and caring perception of the world. By acting on and enfolding the other's and the world's materiality with our own through our *senses* and with *feeling*, we get intimately engaged with "our primordial, pre-reflective, and material *sense-ability* – the general understanding of which becomes reflectively and actively re-cognized in conscious as that particular *aesthetic* concept we call *sensibility*."³³

Events, corporal dramas and destinies.

In *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze distinguishes between the event and the action/passion, the non-consumable and the edible, the incorporeal and the substantial, the shallow and the deep:

Humpty Dumpty opposes the impassibility of events to the actions and passions of bodies, the non-consumable nature of sense to the edible nature of things, the impenetrability of incorporeal entities without thickness to the mixtures of reciprocal penetrations of substances, and the resistance of the surface to the softness of the depth – in short, the "pride" of the verbs to the complacency of substantives and adjectives. Impenetrability means the frontier between the two – and that the person situated on the frontier, precisely as Humpty Dumpty is seated on his narrow wall, has both at his disposal, being the impenetrable master of the articulation of difference ("however, I can manage the whole lot of them").³⁴

Humpty Dumpty knows how to conjoin the two realms, as he is aware of the line of demarcation between the two. He (as symbolic texture / figure) stands in for the paradoxical *proposition* of conjoining and disjoining the two realms. Thus, what does the *proposition* tell us? The substantial and the insubstantial side are invariably distinct, but they bear on each other *in taking effect within, in between, on / of each other* (differentiating, intensifying, particularising, permeating, dramatizing, etc.).

According to Sean Bowden's reading of Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*, the notion of the event refers, indeed, to the effects of passion and action, to the result brought about by corporeal actions and passions.³⁵ In relation to the event, the sensual experience is projected onto a metaphysical surface that is irreducible to the physical extension

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 290.

³⁴ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 25.

³⁵ Sean Bowden, *The Priority of Events: Deleuze's Logic of Sense* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 231.

/ surface, while bearing on the physical extension / surface as event-effects *and* sense-effects:

[W]hat is more intimate or essential to bodies than events such as growing, becoming smaller or being cut? [...] But what we mean by “to grow,” “to diminish,” “to become red,” “to become green,” “to cut,” “to be cut,” etc. is something entirely different. These are no longer states of affairs – mixtures deep inside bodies – but incorporeal events at the surface which are the result of these mixtures.³⁶

Not only that the corporeal (adornment) is related to the incorporeal (shadow) in terms of effect-relations – “infinitely divisible and temporal *event*-effects” organising and differentiating pre-qualitative and pre-extensive “the physical cosmic present” – it also relates in *sense*-effects, “that is, to the kinds of effects produced by *bringing language to bear upon itself*.”³⁷ The event bears on the states of affairs in language (attributes), but it also reflects on language in the process of ‘becoming’ (proposition):

Sense is both the expressible or the expressed of the proposition, and the attribute of the state of affairs. It turns one side towards things and one side toward proposition. But it does not merge with the proposition which expresses it any more than with the state of affairs or the quality which the proposition denotes...[...] It is in this sense that it is an ‘event’: on the condition that the event is not confused with the spatio-temporal realisation in a state of affairs. We will not ask therefore what is the sense of the event: the event is sense itself.³⁸

Thus, the attribute ‘adorned’ in relation to ‘shadow’ relates to a state of affairs, but this relation describes an exteriority: event-effects that actualise and realise in Švankmajer’s interpretation, while implementing further possible realisations and actualisations in other interpretations.³⁹ However, the realisation of event-effects within a particular state of affairs – the beautiful renaissance style gowns, the flaky paint, the outworn carving, etc. – does not exhaust the event’s bearing on

36 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 5f.

37 Bowden, *The Priority of Events*, 25.

38 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 22.

39 On the difference between actualisation and realisation see: Deleuze, “The Method of Dramatization,” 101: “The Idea is an image without resemblance; the virtual actualises itself not through resemblance, but through divergence and differentiation. Differentiation or actualization is always creative with respect to what it actualises, whereas realization is always reproductive or limiting. The difference between the virtual and the actual is no longer the difference of the Same insofar as the Same is posited once in representation, and once again outside representation. Rather it is the difference of the Other; insofar as the Other appears once in the Idea, and once again, though in a totally different manner, in the process of actualizing the Idea.”

Through the Looking-
Glass, Lewis Carroll

‘When I use a
word, **Humpty
Dumpty** said in
rather a scornful tone,
it means just what
I choose it to mean
– neither more nor
less.’ ‘The question is,’
said Alice, ‘whether
you can make words
mean different things.’
‘The question is,’ said
Humpty Dumpty, ‘which
is to be master – that’s
all.’ Alice was too much
puzzled to say anything,
so after a minute
Humpty Dumpty began
again. ‘They have a
temper, some of them
– particularly verbs,
they’re the proudest –
adjectives you can do
anything with, but not
verbs – however, I can
manage the whole lot!
Impenetrability! That’s
what I say!’

sense-relations. The sense emerging from event-effects is complemented by sense-effects that induce incorporeal propositions (*‘adorned shadows’*), that relate “causes to causes and places a bond of causes between them.”⁴⁰ Event-effects and sense-effects interfuse and do not interfuse, resonating between symbol and experience, between body and idea. On this account, Deleuze speaks of ‘destiny’. As the sense-effects articulate ‘propositions’ to be distinguished from the spatio-temporal realisation, they articulate ‘quasi-relations’ that implement ‘destiny’. This is how sense-effects deal with the unbearable of the ‘shadow’, of the powerlessness to think. In reflecting on the ‘becoming’ of language, on the terms of the expressible and expression, sense-effects move toward the inside of sense, its intimacy and fragility, toward the unbearable, toward powerlessness.

The fragility of sense is therefore twofold: an *exterior* and an *interior* fragility. One essentially rooted in corporeal dramas, indefinite dramas of consumption, of actions and passions, of mixture, of intermingling, of mythic conflict, and regressive acts of (symbolic) violence (exterior); the other reflecting on incorporeal destinies, on terms of expression like rhythms, symbols, metaphors, guilt, ‘weak’ propositions longing for non-consumption, non-language, non-substantiality, non-essentiality, powerlessness (interior). As Bowden explicates “events are the ontological primitives from which everything else arises [...] it concerns ‘the ontological priority of events over substances.’”⁴¹ In Deleuze’s understanding the events provide the fundamental ontological category. The strong psychosexual and mythical implications in Švankmajer’s films clearly suggest an archaeological, genealogical reading that traces metaphors and symbols to their complex, ‘textured’ relation to fundamental ontological categories, to notions of guilt, evil and masochistic pleasures (exterior and interior fragility). The bread rolls with nails are a perfect example of masochistic connotations that abound in Švankmajer’s work and therefore strongly resonate with psychosexual implications. While the mythical connotations and their relation to guilt will be discussed elsewhere, the following part of the essay will focus on the revolutionary potential of masochistic imagery in relation to *Alice* on the basis of the notion of subversive pleasures.

Rebellious tropes in *Alice*

When Alice leaves the Caterpillar, who shared with her the knowledge and the means to control her ability to shrink

⁴⁰ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 7.

⁴¹ Jon Roffe, “Review Sean Bowden, *The Priority of Events: Deleuze’s Logic of Sense* (Edinburgh university press, 2011),” *Parrhesia* 15 (2012): 106-111, 107.

and grow, Švankmajer's Alice feels empowered to enter the realm of the flat, two-dimensional surfaces, the land of cards that is ruled by the Queen of Hearts and her continuous and impertinent outcry: "Chop off their heads!" (see picture 10).

In conjunction with this cruel command, we soon realise the purpose of the White Rabbit's pair of scissors; to carry out the beheadings. He beheads card soldiers, Hatter and March Hare and other characters. In the final sequence, Alice gets tried and the Queen of Hearts continuously calls for her to be beheaded. The sequence ends with a passage or transition, shortly before the child wakes up: a number of superimpositions show the child's head replaced by the heads of the grotesque characters. In terror, she slowly shakes her head.

When she wakes up, she finds that she has not been beheaded and sits in between the toys that figured in her dream and visit to Wonderland. However, the glass case, where the stuffed White Rabbit is supposed to be, is empty. Alice gets to the case and draws out a hidden drawer. She pulls out a pair of scissors and says: "He is late as usual, I think I will cut his head off!"

In this last image, Alice clearly assumes the power of the Queen of Hearts. As Deleuze points out in the *Logic of sense, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* can be divided into three parts in relation to the schizophrenic tendency to efface and dissociate surfaces.⁴² Švankmajer's version stresses this schizophrenic tendency. In contrast to the first part's relation to regression, the second part represents a phase of transition, in which Alice gradually realises her power to choose between the world of regression and the world of abstraction. In the scene with the baby frenetically crying and throwing kitchenware out of the door and window of the Duchess' house, Alice picks up the baby and finds, to her surprise, a piglet. The matter of choice for Alice in this scene seems to be between child and pig. During the Hatter's and the March Hare's tea party, she similarly appears to be able to choose between the artist, who deals with heads (Hatter) and the animal that lives in burrows (March Hare).⁴³ Shortly after the tea party, Alice follows the White Rabbit up the stairs to the land of cards. The first thing, Alice witnesses there is a shadow play (adorned shadows). When she pulls back the white cloth, she sees two play-card figures, freely moving, broken out of the play-card's frame. Eventually, the Queen of Hearts appears and demands them to be beheaded, which is then carried out by the white rabbit.

The growing awareness of her being in control is also evident in the trial sequence. Queen and King sit on a table with a plate of cookies and a blue exercise book. Alice is charged for having eaten cookies, which she first denies. Most of the grotesque creatures are present: the skull-headed creatures, the Frog Footman, the Hatter, the March Hare, etc. The Queen continuously interrupts the trial, demanding: "Chop off her head!" However, the King asks her to be patient and to wait until the end of the trial. He shows Alice the exercise book and demands her to read the lines prepared for her, which Alice resolutely denies. Her disobedient behaviour peaks



Picture 10 Queen of Hearts

⁴² Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 234.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 235.

in her deliberately eating the cookies that have been provided for evidence. As she continues to do so, the King joins in with the Queen's call to chop off her head. The White Rabbit moves towards her with his pair of scissors. In the following sequence of transpositions, which has already been referred to, Alice asks only terrified: "Which one?"

Švankmajer's version of the trial reads, indeed, quite different to Carroll's original story. As Michael O'Pray points out:

Švankmajer has never claimed to adapt Carroll, rather they have been free interpretations. This is quite apparent in *Alice* where Švankmajer has stressed the physical strangeness and antiques of the world down the hole, but ignored the rendition of English upper class life so important in the original stories.⁴⁴

While *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, according to Deleuze, counterbalances in its utopian drive the absolute regression to the oral-anal depth on the one side and the "liberation of another, glorious and neutralised surface"⁴⁵ on the other, it appears that Švankmajer's version sides more clearly with the regressive side; however, only in order to emphasise and develop the utopian potential of masochistic and symbolic aggressive imagery, intimating the neutralised surface. The trial sequence is very clear in that respect. When Alice, in Švankmajer's version, disobediently denies the authoritative language of the father, only to adopt at the end of the film the language of the mother, this suggests that the patriarchal order has been replaced by the maternal. In Carroll's text, Alice is taking control, too, at the end of the trial. However, Alice here chiefly disobeys the Queen by explaining how stupid it is to announce the verdict before the end of the trial. While Alice's revolt in Carroll's text is mainly directed at the Queen, Švankmajer's Alice speaks up against the King.

The cruelty of the Queen of Hearts reads clearly as the cruelty of a 'Venus in Furs' – the despotic, erotic role assumed of the women characters in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's text. The sequence of superimpositions that replace Alice's head with the heads of both creatures of depth and height emphasises that Alice's decision-making process has not been concluded, yet. She only realises that both sides – the side of height representing language, knowledge and power and the side of depth relating to libidinal lust (oral, anal, urethral) – appear either denied or difficult to access. The introduction sequence of the film, for example, points strongly to the restricted access to knowledge / power / intellect. The reader of the story, Alice's sister, slaps Alice on her hand, when she reaches for the book. Even more so, the White Rabbit stands for the denied access to the pleasures of height. The path down

*Alice in Prague or The
curious Room, Angela
Carter*

*This piece was written
in praise of Jan Svank-
majer,
the animator of Prague,
and his film of Alice*

[...]

Are they **animate** or not, these beings that jerk and shudder into such a semblance of life? Do these creatures believe themselves to be human? And if they do, at what point might they, by virtue of the sheer intensity of their belief, become so? (In Prague, the city of the **Golem**, an image can come to life)...

44 Michael O'Pray, "A Švankmajer inventory," *Afterimage* 13 (1987): 10-21, 16.

45 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 237.

the rabbit hole, for instance, leads through the drawer of a desk (before Alice finds herself in the elevator). While the White Rabbit is able to open the drawer easily, Alice experiences major difficulties, as for example, the knob is breaking off. The desk obviously represents (denied) access to knowledge. Similarly, the skulls of the White Rabbit's entourage and the exercise book at the end of the film stand in for power and knowledge and loss of control, when denied.

As the pleasures of heights, the pleasures of depth are rendered unpleasurable / pleasurable. The bread rolls with nails, the marmalade with pins or the prospect to eat wood or drink ink, in order to be able to take control of one's own size (depth of passions and actions) and destiny (metaphysical surface), seem duly associated with punishment, denial, and the ambiguity of / indulgence in masochistic pleasure / displeasure.

However, despite (or precisely due to) these rites of punishment, denial and disassociation, Alice appears in the end able to take control and replace the father's order by the mother's. In *Coldness and Cruelty* Deleuze differentiates the sadist's impulse to cruelty and denial from that of the masochist. While denial and punishment take a central position in both, the masochistic denial aims neither at total negation and destruction nor at idealisation, but at aesthetic and dramatic suspension. The fetishized object, as for example the bread rolls with nails, first pursues denial, then neutralisation and finally protective idealisation. Ritualistic repetition takes a similar role. While sadism uses repetition in order to condense and compact the cruel impulse, repetition in masochism serves the aim of aesthetic and dramatic suspension and atmospheric thickening. Within masochism the world enters a state of utter denial in which any suggestion of obscenity is deferred and suspended. The experience of masochistic lust lies within the process of continuous denial and deferral: from the object to the fetish, from one aspect of the object to another, from one side of a person to another. What remains, as Deleuze describes it, is nothing but a heavily saturated atmosphere like a scent that envelops and encircles the moment of utter standstill, not to be loosened or tightened anymore by further deferral and suspension.

The role of the White Rabbit is very interesting in this respect, as his continuous lament 'Oh dear, oh dear, I am going to be late!' does create an ongoing atmosphere of deferral; as does the fact that Alice never quite seems to be able to reach him. The White Rabbit functions as mediator between Alice and the Queen, as representative of the maternal order. He leads Alice to the land of cards and he executes the Queen's

...The Doctor [the famous Dr. Dee] thinks about these things a great deal and thinks the child upon his knee [Alice], babbling about the inhabitants of another world, must be little automaton popped up from God knows where. Meanwhile, the door marked "Forbidden" opened up again.

It came in.

It rolled on little wheels, a wobbling, halting, toppling progress, a clockwork land galleon, tall as a mast, advancing at a stately if erratic pace, nodding and becking and shedding inessential fragments of its surface as it came, its foliage rustling, now stuck and perilously rocking at a crack in the stone floor with which its wheels cannot cope, now flying helter-skelter, almost out of control, wobbling, clicking, whirring, an electric juggernaut evidently almost on the point of collapse; it has been a heavy afternoon....

cruel orders. The same holds true for the deeply ritualistic and repetitive nature of the Hatter's and March Hare's tea party that takes place before Alice reaches the land of cards.

However, the masochistic drive towards deferral and suspense should not lead to the hasty conclusion that the masochistic bearing of the adorned shadows is unable to transcend the world of phantasm. The masochistic and symbolic aggressive revolt against the authoritative order of the father potentially extends beyond the world of aesthetical and fictional phantasm that it creates. The point of subversion, of reversal in the masochistic world, which leads to the utopian event of rebirth, is ritualistic death (dispossession): in *Alice* the sequence of superimpositions, in which Alice's head is replaced by various heads of the creatures of Wonderland. In relation to the phantasmagorical event of rebirth that readjusts the world to the maternal order, the masochist will encounter the myth and rites linked to the phantasmagorical world. The ritualistic rebirth will lead him / her out of the patriarchal into the maternal order, while symbolically aggressively subverting structural elements of the authoritative order. As Deleuze points out in *Coldness and Cruelty* the masochist's relation to guilt is not directed at the father. Quite to the contrary, he / she experiences anything related to the patriarchal order as a flaw that is to be punished. 'Guilt' is perceived as absurd, which forms a vital part of the masochist's triumph over the father. While the masochist derives his / her lust mainly from the denial of the patriarchal order, he / she will find in myth and rite the maternal subversion of the father's order. By devising a contract, the patriarchal order ends and is subdued to the law of the mother.

Thus, when at the end of the film Alice threatens to behead the White Rabbit, the law of the mother has overwritten the patriarchal order, or at least we glimpse the utopian possibility of this event. Most importantly, Alice's masochistic empowerment reaches beyond the phantasmagorical confines of her dream-state. The film is clear in this respect. The rhetorical power of mythic and ritualistic imagery should not be underestimated. In order to understand this subversive power that extends beyond the phantasm, it is worthwhile to return briefly to Ricoeur's notion of the mimetic function and its lasting, collapsing effect between a textual *inside* and *outside*, Sobchack's elucidations on the pre-formative power of the subject-object relation to ethics and aesthetics, and Deleuze's concept of the event, before the paper will draw toward a preliminary conclusion.

...But, although it looked as if eccentrically self-propelled, Arcimboldo the Milanese pushed it, picking up bits of the thing as they fell off, tut-tutting at its ruination, pushing it, shoving it, occasionally picking it up bodily and carrying it. He was smeared all over with its secretions and looked forward to a good wash once it had been returned to the curious room from whence it came. There, the Doctor and his assistant will take it apart until the next time.

This thing before us, although it is not, was not and never will be alive, has been animate and will be animate again, but, at the moment, not, for now, after one final shove, it stuck stock-still, wheels halted, wound down, uttering one last, gross, mechanical sigh.
[...]



Picture 11 Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Summer*, 1572

Mimesis II

Ricœur's notion of mimesis essentially entails an intensification and enhancement of meaning structures. The mimetic reconstruction of relations of action and passion serves to enhance everyday sense relations. Ricœur, in this respect, distinguishes mimesis₁, mimesis₂, and mimesis₃. Mimesis₁ describes the cultural pre-understanding of action-relations with regard to symbols and temporal implications. Mimesis₂ comprises the moment of reconstruction and re-inscriptions. As Ricœur notes:

Mimesis at this stage signifies the production of a quasi-world of action through the activity of emplotment. Far from being an effigy or a replica of action, this emplotment is its intelligible schema (*épure*). It imitates in that it is intelligible.⁴⁶

The notion of intelligibility is most important in this respect as it highlights mimesis₂'s ability to integrate and mediate. Within the third layer, mimesis₃, the world of the text and the reader overlap: the text *interior* and *exterior* overlap and interact in terms of a horizon. This horizon that essentially represents an existential horizon, prolongs the event of enhancement and intensification that mimesis₂ facilitates. It is of major importance to understand the progression taking place from mimesis₁ to mimesis₃ as an interlocking process of enfoldment, which deals with the intelligibility of textual and symbolic structures. Mimesis₃ still serves the function of intelligibility of symbolic meaning as it has to be essentially understood as imitation of motivational structures. In this respect, Ricœur explains:

However, must we say that, at the stage of mimesis₃, the poem still imitates real action? Not, if real means already there and available. But yes, if real means that human action is 'effectively' re-figured through the fact of being configured.⁴⁷

Subversive Pleasures

The implications of Ricœur's notion of mimesis are far reaching. It entails that the reconstruction and enhancement of action and passion relations bear an actual effect on human action in terms of an expansion; an expansion that draws on pre-understandings, is facilitated through the enhancement and intensification during poetic reconstruction, and overturned during reception. The progression from mimesis₁ to mimesis₃ entails an interlocking of symbolic instances of mediation, which provoke the impulse of reconstruction (from experience, to refiguration, to transfiguration and back to experience). Action and passion relations are subject to re-symbolisation. Thus the three-folded understanding of mimesis, articulates the general formulation of a hermeneutic circle that interfuses human existence.

Ricœur's notion of mimesis is not only important for suggesting the consistency of reality and fiction. This consistency is essential, as it negotiates the very possibility of change. As it has been elaborated, change is in Ricœur's three-folded notion of mimesis closely associated with intelligibility and expansion. Vivian Sobchack's concept of interobjectivity crucially links to notions of expansion, too, as the

⁴⁶ Ricœur, "Mimesis and Representation," 21.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

intimate relation of mutuality and reversibility between subject and object has the effect of broadening and enriching the subject's relation to the world in ethical and aesthetic terms. Moreover, this intimate relationship presumes aesthetic and ethical notions. Sobchack's concept of interobjectivity highlights the bodily, fleshly condition of being ontologically intertwined and interlaced with the world and its materiality and objectivity, a fact that practices of adornment heavily draw upon. As Sobchack explains in the introduction to her book:

Embodiment is a radically material condition of human being that necessarily entails both the body and the consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an irreducible ensemble.⁴⁸

The adorned body and artefact highlight this irreducibility. In addition, Ricœur's notion of mimesis emphasises – by drawing attention to the *concrete effects* of symbolisation processes – the other aspect, namely the metaphysical dimension of the 'shadow', the sense-effects that relates back to the means of expression and language and interrelates 'cause to cause' in effect. Change in terms of a revolutionary potential / actualisation requires not only the bodily, fleshly and intentional side of action and passion, but also the insubstantial, abstract agency of the event. In Deleuze's understanding both sides need to go together in order to be able to inaugurate change. Thomas Nail explicates this inherent relation of the event to metaphysical realism and its revolutionary potential in Deleuze's work:

Without the consistency and order that the event gives to being, there is only contingency, potentially and pure multiplicity. That is, the necessity of contingency risks falling prey to the twin dangers of virtual hierarchy and political ambivalence [...]. Opposed to the mere possibility of the real, Deleuze and Badiou both develop complex logics of the event that are both diagnostic and imperative. These logics are far too complex to summarize here. In short, however, the goal of the event is to create a consistency of the real defined by immanent processes of connection that do not presuppose the product they produce [...].⁴⁹

Subversive pleasures share this double-edged nature of *being diagnostic and imperative*. In order to have an inherent relation to change it is not enough to simply bear the ontological possibility of revolution. A link has to be drawn between the event and the action / passion, a relation of effect, of event-effects and sense-effects. This is actually, what Ricœur's notion of mimesis is implying, too. In the reconstructing, poetic function of mimesis₂, there is a non-representational, structuring force at work that allows and demands change by never actually severing the effect-relation to the world of action and passion ((re) symbolisation processes). Drawing an impenetrable line of distinction between reality and fiction has precisely this effect and disregards the complex interplay in between metaphysical and actual forces. The metaphysical surface of the event has to be understood as bearing an effect on the world of action

⁴⁸ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 4.

⁴⁹ Thomas Nail, "Revolution and the Return of Metaphysics," in *Gilles Deleuze and Metaphysics*, ed. A. Beaulieu, E. Kazarian, J. Sushytska (Lanham, MA & London: Lexington Books, 2014), 207-223, 219.

and passion, in a non-representational, structuring way. Restricting the possibility (or rather impossibility) of change to the world of actions and passions, reducing it to a logic of mere metamorphoses and constant 'othering', leads into the impasse of dogmatic realism – a risk that is implied, when denying the contingency of the real and fiction: "The purpose of the event is to *actually* demonstrate the existence and consequences of an event constitutive of reality and subjectivity itself."⁵⁰

Thus, speaking of adorned shadows and subversive pleasures in terms of symbolic aggressive acts of dramatization, indeed, draws on the distinct realms of the insubstantial, ordering, metaphysical sense-effect and the intersubjective / interobjective world of action and passion (event-effect), facilitating sensual, aesthetical and ethical expansion and intelligibility. The adorned shadows and subversive pleasures in Švankmajer's *Alice* highlight the very presupposition to change, diagnosing the present and picturing the possibility / actuality of revolutionary change. Alice's revolt at the end of the film – her proposition that she will cut the rabbit's head off, while having actually assumed the power and right to do so – is the direct result of her experience of oppression. Diagnostically and imperatively she is (made) aware of the symbolic structures denying her access to knowledge, the right to rule over her own body (pleasures, depth of actions and passions) and her destiny (ideas, metaphysical surface) and (enabled) to re-symbolise effectively (*event-effects and sense-effects, habitually and symbolically*) structures of oppression. Yet, change requires the radical disassociation of oppressive power structures, to resort in utter states of powerlessness, to open immersive and intimate 'rites of passage' between essential and in-essential, edible and in-edible, substantial and in-substantial effects – ritual death. Alice is victimised in the order of the father, but liberated by the law of the mother. Ritually 'subverting' (re-symbolising) the very symbolic structures that oppress her, allows her gradually to take control, but in a weak, fragile sense.

Conclusion

Thus, how far can you go *in textual analysis*: is the textual *inside* and *outside* to collapse, as Ricœur's notion of mimesis, Sobchack's concept of interobjectivity and Deleuze's conception of the event suggest? Does this collapse bear subversive potential? Is the analytical text to be betrayed poetically? Violently opened to masochistic pains and pleasures? Thrown passionately back onto the effaced body, endlessly working through and mixing collaged farces? Pushed in a 'weak' sense towards political ends? The unbearable remains the unbearable. The writer does not betray the text, the text betrays the writer. This is most important to understand in relation to the condition of powerlessness: the condition of disassociation. You draw out the intolerable in the 'substance', in the forces you are subdued to, that crush you with all they have, that suffocate you, that leave you no room, grind you, make you disappear.

Yet, within utter despair, you *can* go chasing shadows. Alice goes out hunting. She seizes, subdues, weeps and enjoys. As Humpty Dumpty rightly asserts: "look out for the verbs!" Reach up 'high' and dive in 'deep'. Expand your sensibilities, indulge in libidinal pleasures, re- eroticize the body and therein take the revolutionary potential of the mythic and ritualistic rebirth seriously in that it actually effects the world of actions and passions. The revolutionary potential realises within the hermeneutic-

50 *Ibid.*, 218.

phenomenological act of understanding, challenging and expanding the given and the utopian horizon of one's thoughts and feelings. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi highlights the importance of the hermeneutic act of interpretation to political ends:

Poetry is the language of nonexchangeability, the return of infinite hermeneutics, and the return of the sensuous body of language. I'm talking about poetry here as an excess of language, a hidden resource which enables us to shift from one paradigm to another.⁵¹

This 'shifting' allows the non-substantial, the non-essential sense-effects to reflect on the 'state of affairs' taking place and actualising / realizing its possibilities. Dramatizing language (in tension to analytical language) leans toward the subtle dramas and destinies residing *within, in between on / of* the figures of thought and terms of expression employed in film texts. As Deleuze asserts in a conversation with Jeanette Colombel:

Staging means that the written text is going to be illuminated by other values, non-textual values (at least in the ordinary sense): it is indeed possible to substitute for the history of philosophy a theatre of philosophy. You say I have sought another technique, closer to collage than to theatre, for my conception of difference [*Difference and Repetition*]. The kind of collage technique or even the genesis of series (repetition with slight variations) which you see in Pop Art. But you also thought I wasn't entirely successful. I believe I go farther in my book on the logic of sense.⁵²

'Staging' responds differently to the *textual* need of interpretation; it explores the *textual* need at different levels of bodily expansion and varying degrees of conceptual intensity. Merging poetic with analytic language answers this call, folds the line to find room to breathe, traces the dynamisms, dramas and dreams of the regressive "larval subject,"⁵³ reckons with the destiny of the idea, but is in all this diagnostically and imperatively aware of the suffocating will of the unbearable – erotics of interpretation.

A dog's life, Henri
Michaux

[...]

As for **books**, they wear me out like nothing else. I don't leave a single word in its own sense or even in its own form.

I trap it and after some struggling I uproot it and turn it finally away from the author's flock.

In a single chapter you have thousands of words all at once in front of you and I have to sabotage them all. I feel I must.

[...]

And when the book is completely read, I am sorry, for I have understood nothing... of course. Have been unable to fatten on any of it. I remain thin and dry.

You see, I used to think that when I had destroyed everything I would attain balance. Possibly so. But that comes slowly, that comes very slowly.

51 *Ibid.*, 140f.

52 Deleuze, Gilles, "*Desert Islands and Other Texts. 1953-1974*, ed. D. Lapoujade, transl. M. Taormina (Los Angeles, LA: Semiotext(e) 2004 [1969]), 144

53 *Ibid.*, 108.

Pages

Eat the page,

smear its ink,

glove its face,

feast on to its pathetic
clench.

Isn't that what you came
for?

It will do you no harm,

it answers.

stretches its legs,

fight its breath

finds no rest.

Whimsical.

Hide it in a drawer,

fail it, flatten it,

to rotten, bury it deep,

to sink, burn it neat.

With a smile.

It will call you,

whisper in your ear

make you disappear.

Are you ready?

Do you see the lichen
glow in between?

Blossoming chatoyant on
the voluminous cheek?

Adorning the unbearable
sad piece?

Curving up and down in
pure lust and shame?

Vomiting cascade over
cascade, fold after fold to
gleam?

Do you see the tiny mush-
rooms for its eyes, the
delicately rug corrals for
its ears? The little carra-
geen for its beard?

Oh I desire it so much,
it's sweet colour, texture,
smell and breath. More
beauty is rare.

Eat it,

smear it,

glove it.

rip it apart.

Weak.

Make no mistake.

It feels you,

tied square.

It cheats you,

parcelled fair.

Wants you,

in letters spare.

Sweats you,

in white air.

Inhales you,

in fleshly despair.

Fails you.

Silent.

The ink runs down the yellowish hair.

Texturing the face scare.

The blood seeps through tightened air.

Licking the feet in utter despair.

Close your eyes, otherwise you will nothing!

Alice despotically says.

Additional material

Excerpt from: Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1993), 21.

I am full by the author, May 2015, the line "My head is like a flame" deliberately intends to refer to the Portugal The Man song "Head Is A Flame (Cool With It)" from the *In the Mountain in the Cloud* album, 2011.

Excerpt from Antonin Artaud "Preface. The Theater and Culture," *The Theatre and Its Double*, transl. M. C. Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958 [1938]), 12.

Pictures 1-8, 10: Film stills from Jan Švankmajer, *Something from Alice*, 1988, 84 min.

Pictures 9: drawing by the author, March 2016.

Pages by the author, March 2016.

Excerpt from Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1993), 205f.

Excerpt from Angela Carter "Alice in Prague or the curious room, dedicated to Jan Švankmajer," *American ghosts and old world wonders* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), 121-139, 65 f.

Excerpt from Henri Michaux "A Dog's Life," *Selected Writings. The Space Within* (New York: New Directions Books, 1968 [1930]), 19.

Bio: Mareike Sera studied BA (Hons.) Visual Theories and MA Film History and Criticism at University of East London with Prof. Michael O'Pray as one of her main supervisors. For both courses, she has been awarded first class degrees. Shortly, she will obtain a doctoral degree from the Humboldt University of Berlin, department of Slavonic Studies, where Ms. Sera was supervised by Prof. Peter Zajac. Her research focuses on symbolic, performative textures and how the hermeneutical approach of Paul Ricœur can be seen to broaden and enrich film-phenomenological thinking in this respect. The importance attached to sensual and tactile qualities in the films of Jan Švankmajer makes his work most valuable to hermeneutic phenomenological analysis.