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INFERTILITY, ABUSE, AND MENOPAUSE:  
Surrealist Motherhood in Jan Švankmajer's *Little Otik*

Jan Švankmajer's quintessentially surrealist film *Little Otik* portrays motherhood as disastrous and flawed: his female characters are not just neurotic; their mothering actions also unfailingly lead to the destruction of people and things around them. In order to create such a vicious version of motherhood, Švankmajer utilizes the great agency that surrealism provides the unconscious. Indeed, playing upon his characters' desperate dreams and neuroses, Švankmajer permits fetishized desires to overtake reality. He first establishes the neighbours' young daughter, the eponymous character's infertile mother, and the old caretaker as representatives both of the three main stages of womanhood (pre-pubescence, adulthood, and menopause); and of three improbable approaches to motherhood (too early, barren, and too late). Then, in keeping with surrealist methods, Švankmajer repeatedly emphasizes the negative and uncanny elements of the characters' experiences and yearnings. The result is a motherhood that is conclusively savage, violent, and cannibalistic.

### Surrealist Overview and Background

*Little Otik* is a clear example of the surrealist movement. Displaying elements of surrealism as outlined by the prolific Andre Breton and Georges Bataille, Švankmajer creates a world for his characters in which desperate desires take on a life of their own and, ultimately, overpower reality. Bataille points out that surrealism values dream-like approaches to art and literature. That is, art should be irrational or, at

the very least, it should emphasize the absence of rationality.<sup>1</sup> Breton, too, emphasizes dreams as a fundamental aspect of surrealism: it is through dreaming and desiring, he claims, that a surrealist character has the ability to more easily accept his/her existence.<sup>2</sup> By abandoning rationality, then, the surrealist construct holds the potential for overcoming great disappointment.<sup>3</sup>

In *Surrealism and Film*, J. H. Matthews offers further support of this considerable power that surrealism instils upon desperate yearnings. Matthews suggests that subconscious ambitions are allowed an agency in surrealist productions that would not be found in more realistic works. The action of the surrealist film, for instance, moves forward not only via actual interactions, but also through emotional longings.<sup>4</sup> As Matthews claims, suppressed desires are just as influential upon surrealist plots as are real-life activities, if not more so. In fact, for the surrealist movement, a blurred boundary between reality and dreams is essential to demonstrating the tremendous influence of innermost desires.<sup>5</sup> Reality, then, is not at all separate from hopes and aspirations; rather, careful harmony between the two spheres<sup>6</sup> must be found.

Of course, the aforementioned agency of dreams does not mean that the transition from boring reality to inner fulfilment is not painful. Quite the contrary, as Bataille demonstrates. According to Bataille, in order to accomplish a state that exists beyond one's real self, a person must endure discomfort and even agony.<sup>7</sup> This excruciating realization of desire is unquestionably present in Švankmajer's film, at least in regards to maternity: perhaps paralleling the pain of childbirth, not one woman in this work enters into motherhood without encountering violence.

<sup>1</sup> Bataille, G., *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, New York 2006, 57. Surrealist works, he says, are "not subordinated to the control of reason".

<sup>2</sup> Breton, A., *First Manifesto of Surrealism – 1924*, trans. A. S. Kline, místo vydání neuvědno, 2010, 10. "The spirit of the man who dreams is quite content with what happens to him. The agonizing question of possibility is no longer posed," Breton proclaims.

<sup>3</sup> As will soon be demonstrated, *Little Otik* is no exception to this claim: particular aspects of the disappointment the characters face in the real world disappear in the surrealist sphere.

<sup>4</sup> Matthews, J. H., *Surrealism and Film*, Michigan 1971, 7. "Surrealism at all times emphasizes [...] feeling rather than thought, instinct and desire rather than reasonable commonplace."

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, 4. "Surrealists [...] refuse to separate what they call dream from life. They are free, therefore, to subject reality to re-evaluation. They demonstrate that man's sensitivity to what is real is deeply influenced by his desires."

<sup>6</sup> Frank, A., *Reframing Reality: The Aesthetics of the Surrealist Object in French and Czech Cinema*, Chicago 2013, 18. Or, as Frank puts it, "a balance between physical reality and the unconscious".

<sup>7</sup> Bataille, G., *The Absence of Myth*, 190. "The quest for the grail [i.e., realized dreams] is linked with the pursuit of anguish, to the extent that profound pleasure can be experienced only in anguish."

In *Little Otik*, the above aspects of surrealism are combined with folkloric characteristics and are coloured by trends in contemporary Czech culture, which will be addressed in the sections below. The result, as will soon be seen, is an undeniably savage motherhood.

## Abnormal Motherhood

Since Švankmajer incorporates trends from various spheres in order to strengthen his surrealist approach, it is important to understand both historical and literary contexts for his work. Historically, motherhood has long been considered a complicated state. Indeed, as Simone de Beauvoir remarks in *The Second Sex*, with pregnancy many insecurities begin, together with complexities a woman must face as she transitions into a motherly figure.<sup>8</sup> Similar issues and questions are applicable to recent trends in Czech motherhood. Women of the Soviet period who suffered from the so-called “modern slavery” of having to simultaneously work two full-time jobs (in both the public and domestic spheres) suddenly found more options after the fall of Communism.<sup>9</sup> In an effort to secure better employment and more satisfactory lifestyles, Czech women pursued higher education at an increased rate after 1989. This aspiration for advanced scholarship in turn led to a delay of or reduction in childbirth.<sup>10</sup> These post-Communist decreases in Czech childbearing support Beauvoir’s claims of complicated pregnancy and motherhood. Already uncertain about how to fit into a new society or economy, the Czech woman

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<sup>8</sup> De Beauvoir, S., *The Second Sex*, New York 2011, 538. “Pregnancy is above all a drama playing itself out in the woman between her and herself. She experiences it both as enrichment and a mutilation; the fetus is part of her body, and it is a parasite exploiting her; she possesses, and she is possessed by it.”

<sup>9</sup> Raabe, P. H., Women and Gender in the Czech Republic and Cross-National Comparisons, *Czech Sociological Review* 7.2 (Fall 1999), 223.

<sup>10</sup> Sobotka, T., Fertility in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989: Collapse and Gradual Recovery, *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 36.2 (2011), 274. As Sobotka states, “the boom in tertiary education was a major factor behind the postponement of births, [...] as having children during one’s studies became rare and many younger people increasingly postponed family formation even after the completion of their education.” See also Kostecký, T. – Vobecká, J., Housing Affordability in Czech Regions and Demographic Behavior – Does Housing Affordability Impact Fertility?, *Sociologický časopis/Czech Sociological Review* 45.6 (Dec. 2009), 1198. In the 1990s “the total fertility rate [of the Czech Republic] dropped [...] and remained there throughout the period between 1996 and 2003”.

intuits that parenting may obscure her own existence or future; therefore, she delays childbirth until she is well established in society, or in some cases, she eliminates motherhood from her future entirely. The traditional expectations and roles of mothers are broken down by this socio-economic shift, and the result is parenthood outside of the standard framework.

Abnormal and negative motherhood is seen in a literary context, as well, and at times parallels real historical trends. In understanding this overlap, Beauvoir's commentary is once again a useful tool. Beauvoir spotlights women who, rather than approaching motherhood in a selfless manner, bear children to offset neurotic or depressed feelings.<sup>11</sup> These so-called "bad mothers" exacerbate an already difficult process by conceptualizing their children through lenses tinted by their own neuroses. According to Beauvoir, women who enter into parenthood for questionable reasons reproduce and prolong despondency through their offspring.<sup>12</sup> Beauvoir's motherhood, then, is almost contagious in its neurotic qualities. Yet these characteristics can be traced throughout certain literature, as well. For instance, Irina Strout notes additional female characteristics that lead to abnormal motherhood within literary works. Oftentimes, Strout claims, an imaginative and desperate female character is rejected by those in her community. Thus, the forsaken woman is a figure not unknown to literature:<sup>13</sup> heroines who do not fit neatly into the cultural concept of normal motherhood are renounced and anathematized by their own society.

In *Little Otik* specifically, similar issues of delayed and abnormal motherhood come into play. While the women's levels of education, economic success, and employment are never addressed directly, Švankmajer does allude to the aforementioned post-Communist changes in Czech motherhood. For instance, Božena Horáková and her husband seem to have unlimited funds: depressed by their failure to procreate, the couple buys a house in the countryside. There, Božena escapes the stress of the urban environment, which frequently reminds her of her inability to become pregnant.<sup>14</sup> Later, once Otik has fully revealed his ravenous nature, one never

<sup>11</sup> Beauvoir, S., *The Second Sex*, 566. Pregnancy serves "as a remedy for melancholia or neuroses".

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, 567. When women use motherhood to escape depression or neuroses, "this chain of misery perpetuates itself indefinitely", she claims.

<sup>13</sup> Strout, I., "She Who Dwells Alone...": Mad Mothers, Old Spinsters, and Hysterical Women in William Wordsworth's Poetry of 1798, in: *Disjointed Perspectives on Motherhood*. Ed. C. F. Florescu, Maryland 2013, 159. "Women with depraved imagination are abandoned, isolated or labelled mad." For more information on neurotic motherhood, please see the other articles in this same book.

<sup>14</sup> The urban setting is one in which there is an influx of advertisements, even about pregnancy and child-rearing. As Zachary Snider points out in "Unwanted Mother, Unwanted Motherhood:

satiated by just milk and carrots,<sup>15</sup> the Horákovás buy massive amounts of meat in order to satisfy his hunger. Such gargantuan quantities of food are undoubtedly expensive; therefore, one may draw the conclusion that the Horákovás enjoy a relatively stable amount of financial security, or at least they did before being bestowed the gift of Otik. Historically speaking, then, the combination of economic success with delayed motherhood and difficult propagation is hardly surprising: although it is impossible to identify Božena's level of education, her fairly successful position in life mirrors those of the aforementioned '90s Czech women.

Furthermore, the isolating aspect of unnatural motherhood in *Little Otik* is indicative of both Strout's and Beauvoir's claims. Švankmajer's neurotic women, who imagine non-traditional motherhood, can enjoy no position other than isolation from the rest of society. For example, in accepting a tree stump as her legitimate child, Božena is the epitomic abnormal mother: not only does she override a natural suppression of reproduction, but she also raises a non-human baby. Her experience with motherhood, then, is a complete outlier to the rest of her society, and by attempting to protect her precious offspring, Božena becomes only further isolated. Her husband, initially frustrated by her acceptance of just a "piece of wood", eventually grows to fear Otik and demands that he be killed. Božena's subsequent rejections of his pleas isolate her from her own partner; ultimately the Horáková family dynamic pits Božena and Otik against Karel (the father). Finally, in attempting to hide her secret, Božena also removes herself from her urban community. She covers Otik up in public and locks him away at home. Whenever people inquire after him or attempt to see him, she snaps at them and, at times, even forcibly restrains them. Paralleling the aforementioned literary trope of female anathematization,

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Competing Maternities in Selby's *Requiem for a Dream*", advertisements represent the forced normalcy of life. For example, in the beginning scene of *Little Otik*, a radiantly pregnant woman in bright red clothing advertises easy, successful pregnancies. In other words, she and her parenting experience serve as the norm. Such advertisements are entirely non-existent in the country setting; therefore, one could consider the country-house as a true retreat from painful reminders of infertility.

<sup>15</sup> Not just adult desires, but also infantile ones are given agency in surrealism. Since in Freudian philosophy infantile desires conflate basic needs (food, comfort, and so on) with fetishization, the milk and carrots here may be seen as objects representative of sexual activity. The carrots (phallic shapes) are soaked in milk (an unmistakable parallel to both sexual fluid and mammary excretion). Food and sexual desire are inseparable at an infantile stage, if we follow Freud's line of thought; thus, these objects may be seen as satisfying both the stomach and the groin.

then, her mothering becomes an entirely private and isolated matter, one in which no one – neither her husband nor her neighbours – may actively participate.<sup>16</sup>

Isolating motherhood is a factor in Alžbětka's case, as well. Neither child nor adult, Alžbětka walks a fine line between naïve innocence and sexual maturity. With no siblings and no other children living in her apartment building, she is by far the youngest person in her domicile. Ultimately, though, it is her pursuit of motherhood that causes the most severe cases of abandonment by those around her. The book she reads on infertility and sexual dysfunction angers her father, who punishes her every time it makes an appearance: he both physically and emotionally pushes her away. Eager to not replicate an infertile lifestyle that she believes to be contagious, Alžbětka also sets herself apart from Božena: she rejects Božena's well-intentioned gifts and motherly caresses. By taking an acute interest in abnormal motherhood (that is, pre-pubescent motherhood with fairy-tale qualities), Alžbětka embodies Strout's and Beauvoir's commentaries on abnormal motherhood. Both neurotic and incredibly imaginative, the young girl becomes gradually more removed from her community. Meanwhile, entering into motherhood for unnatural reasons, Alžbětka perpetuates a negative cycle of upbringing, in which Otik's monstrous behaviour is never forced into submission.

## Folkloric Elements

Švankmajer further reinforces the surrealist aspects of his film by applying key elements of the folktale. Indeed, by basing *Little Otik* on K. J. Erben's nineteenth-century fairy-tale *Otesánek* Švankmajer makes no effort to hide the essential role that folklore plays in his more contemporary version of the story. In fact, in many ways, aspects of *Little Otik* parallel elements established by two key folklore canons: both *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* by Max Lüthi and *Morphology of the Folktale* by Vladimir Propp.

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<sup>16</sup> One should also note that, in placing Otik under lock and key even when in public, Božena is continuously reliving the pregnancy denied her by unconquerable infertility. The well-protected baby carriage, the secured apartment, even the dank basement Otik is later locked in – all these places are symbolic of Božena's womb. Božena keeps careful watch over these areas and permits access only with hesitation, much as she might with her own uterus. It is through this method that Božena furthers the private and alienating aspects of her motherhood.

In *The European Folktale*, Lüthi outlines many aspects of folklore that set it aside from the broader literary canon. Elements such as one-dimensionality, abstraction, depthlessness, and simplistic repetition are just some of the themes Lüthi identifies as pertinent to the folktale. Many of these general folkloric qualities directly relate to *Little Otik*. For instance, folklore characters accept the supernatural as a normal part of existence. Never are characters surprised by a so-called otherworldly figure, and they converse quite naturally with humans and talking animals alike.<sup>17</sup> Such is the case in *Little Otik*: after Otik takes on life, most people who encounter him do not question his existence. Instead, they simply wonder how best to interact with him: essentially, is he friend or foe? Only those who have not seen the stump child with their own eyes are hesitant to accept the possibility of alternate life forms.

Additionally, in true folkloric fashion, physical pain and abuse are not always portrayed realistically in *Little Otik*. Within a folktale, a person may suffer remarkable physical torment, such as dismemberment, with minimal reaction; indeed, hardly do blood and pain enter this particular genre.<sup>18</sup> Similar glossings over of extreme violence are conducted in *Little Otik*: Alžbětka's elderly abuser and Otik's father are devoured off screen. Instead, Švankmajer takes an entirely simplistic approach towards death, much like in the folktale. While the characters' imminent deaths are made known, many of the gory details are eliminated from the screen.<sup>19</sup> The sexual abuse that young Alžbětka endures from her paedophilic neighbour Žlábek is displayed in similarly elusive terms. Each time the elderly Žlábek puts on his glasses for a closer look at the girl, a desperate hand reaches out from his unbuttoned fly. No engorged genitalia are revealed, and no specificities of molestation are ever illustrated.<sup>20</sup> The lack of an on-screen portrayal of this abuse is therefore quite similar to Lüthi's conception of simplified painful events.

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<sup>17</sup> Lüthi, M., *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, Indiana 1982, 6–7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 12–13.

<sup>19</sup> Of course, Švankmajer does show more brutality in his film than would be seen in the traditional folktale. In some cases, the simplistic, non-bloody deaths to which Lüthi refers are not applicable to *Little Otik*: bones and bits of flesh from gobbled-up animals and people are left for Otik's parents to see, and in one particularly disturbing scene, the screaming face and spurting blood of the social worker are smashed against a translucent door as she succumbs to Otik's insatiable hunger. Nevertheless, because of the above-mentioned bloodless deaths, one cannot ignore the presence of the folkloric interpretation of pain and anguish within the film, as well.

<sup>20</sup> Just because on-screen sexual molestation is never shown, though, does not mean Alžbětka has not suffered victimization. Indeed, Alžbětka's routinely evasive or terrified reactions to this man demonstrate that she suffers some type of abuse.

Extremes are yet another aspect of folklore that directly relate to *Little Otik*. Characters of folktales suffer from severe forms of punishment,<sup>21</sup> and Švankmajer's world proves to be barely different in this respect. Any isolation a character feels in the film, for instance, eventually becomes total abandonment: Božena, the infertile mother of Otik, is forced to hide her impossible child in their apartment; the ravenous infant is ultimately tied up and locked away in a dark basement; the pre-pubescent Alžbětka, by prematurely pursuing motherhood, distances herself from her own family. The condition of Božena and Karel can also be seen as extreme punishment: although desperate to have children, not just one, but both of them are infertile. Božena's attempts at pregnancy later in life, therefore, prove to be much more complicated than what her real counterparts of the '90s encounter. Indeed, while the likelihood that both a woman *and* her partner suffer from infertility is quite small, it is this same remote possibility that plagues the Horákovás.

Additional extremism continues throughout the film. Alžbětka guiltlessly sacrifices Karel to Otik as punishment for him having locked his son in a trunk; Alžbětka's sexual abuser is similarly fed to the monster; and the caretaker marches downstairs after Otik destroys her cabbage patch, presumably to split him in two (which is how the original fairy-tale ends). In all these cases and more, punishment is incredibly severe: the cessation of life and the prevention of further development serve as exclusive means of discipline. Other extremes are identifiable in *Little Otik*, as well. There is the extreme of reproductive inability: the childless couple in the film parallels the common folkloric trope of an old couple who has always wanted children but who could never conceive. The extreme of criminal behaviour is also present: Alžbětka quickly transitions from relatively harmless theft to the atrocity of human sacrifice.<sup>22</sup>

In his work, Lüthi addresses also the issue of unteachability. Folklore characters, he claims, never learn their lessons; they act instinctively and instantaneously, without considering past episodes in which the same actions ended badly.<sup>23</sup> This folkloric quality is unavoidably present in Švankmajer's film. Never seeming to learn from previous mistakes, the characters in *Little Otik* automatically cycle through the same set of actions. For instance, no matter how much he consumes – whether it is her own hair, their cat, the postman, or a social worker – Božena still considers Otik to be eternally innocent. She refuses to learn from Otik's increasingly dangerous

<sup>21</sup> Lüthi, M., *The European Folktale*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, 35.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, 39.



behaviour, and instead begins anew with her belief in his purity after each cannibalistic episode.<sup>24</sup>

This concept of unteachability corresponds with Propp's discussion of folkloric repetition, as well. In his *Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp insists that repetition plays a crucial role in the construct of the folktale. The specific type of repetition may vary, he claims, but nevertheless the general theme of repeatability is frequently present in folktales.<sup>25</sup> *Little Otik* is no different in this sense. Božena's process of mourning her infertility is seen in her persistent packing and unpacking of unused baby clothes. Karel, later violently reacting to Božena's acceptance of Otik as a real infant, beats the stump against a table, yelling several times that it is just a piece of wood. The caretaker repeatedly returns to her cabbages to ensure their successful growth. Even the insertion of Erben's fairy-tale into Švankmajer's work, as narrated by Alžbětka, is repetitive: the presence of the original tale returns again and again to be compared to "real" events within the film.

## Infertility and Objects

The aforementioned surrealist elements strengthened by historical and literary trends cause specific instances of motherhood in *Little Otik* to be not just negative, but also destructive. The first type of violently abnormal motherhood is adult, yet barren, as represented by the infertile Božena Horáková. Despite an overpowering desperation to become a mother, Božena is generally disassociated from sex, one of the only actions that, in truth, could actuate her deepest desire of becoming a mother.

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<sup>24</sup> Of course, in some ways she is technically correct. In a surrealist setting, all desires are fetishistic, and all fetishized desires within infants are basically the same. Each desire and impulse that an infant has, is simultaneously libidinal and entirely innocent. Food, human contact, comfort – these and more could be seen as displacements of sexual contact. Yet because everything can be seen as sexual, then everything is non-sexual at the same time. As such, Otik is both a voracious monster and a purely innocent being. For more on sexuality and eroticism in a surrealist context, see the chapter "Happiness, Eroticism and Literature" from Georges Bataille's *The Absence of Myth*.

<sup>25</sup> Propp, V., *Morphology of the Folktale*, Indiana 1958, 67. "Repetition may appear as an even distribution (three tasks, three years' service), as an accumulation (the third of three tasks as the most difficult, the third battle the worst, etc.), or may twice produce negative results before the third, successful outcome."

Indeed, with the exception of Otik's birth scene<sup>26</sup> and the hair-eating scene,<sup>27</sup> Božena is entirely disassociated from sexuality and its reproductive consequences: not only are both Horáková's infertile, but they also seem disinterested and distant from sex itself. A realistic approach to Božena's situation, then, reveals only hopelessly eternal infertility.

However, Božena can be defined in more ways than just through her actions (or lack thereof, when regarding sexual intercourse). In true surrealist style, it is not physical behaviour, but rather the objects around her, that best expose Božena's desires and thus allow her to become a mother in spite of sexual dysfunction. Indeed, as Alison Frank claims in *Reframing Reality: The Aesthetics of the Surrealist Object in French and Czech Cinema*, objects are essential to the art of surrealists due to their close connection to the unconscious.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, Božena is defined by these so-called "surrealist objects": objects that are not just practical, but that also have the ability to demonstrate personal desires and needs.<sup>29</sup> Like Otik himself,<sup>30</sup> other objects in Božena's life magnify her desperation to reproduce. Her suitcase packed with brand-new baby clothes, for example, is certainly practical: if she wants a child, she must have clothes for it to wear. However, this suitcase also represents her tremendous eagerness to have a child, her failed attempts at becoming pregnant, and her stubborn unwillingness to ever fully abandon the dream of having a child. Indeed, although she packs up the clothes after a final visit to her doctor, she never gives away the suitcase. She thus demonstrates either a glimmer of hope that the scientific proof of her infertility is faulty, or else a fairy-tale belief that miracle birth is possible.

<sup>26</sup> Božena's husband pulls a tree stump out of the ground with great force and effort. The camera angle (a close-up of his face while he is forcefully tugging at something out of the frame) hints at masturbation. His return to Božena with the end result of his masturbatory act (a polished and shaped tree stump) suggests that she served as his inspiration.

<sup>27</sup> As Otik is eating Božena's hair (the first example of his gluttony) her husband comes from behind to cut her hair and save her from being scalped. The positioning of him directly behind Božena, as well as their quick back-and-forth movements and sharp cries, illustrate the only on-screen example of "sex" the two have in the film.

<sup>28</sup> Frank, A., *Reframing Reality*, 16. "All surrealist objects may be considered personal because the associations that the unconscious suggests in relation to the object will be symptomatic of the individual's preoccupations."

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Hames, P., *The Core of Reality: Puppets in the Feature Films of Jan Švankmajer*, in: *The Cinema of Jan Švankmajer: Dark Alchemy*. Ed. P. Hames, New York 2008, 83–103. Otik, Hames argues, "is a direct creation of the characters' desire".

Other objects illustrate this desperation to become a mother, as well. Having been presented Otik by a teasing husband, Božena begins acting as though the stump were real.<sup>31</sup> She becomes keen on faking a pregnancy so she can take her new-born home with her. Soon, she proudly presents to Karel her pregnancy pillows, with months one through nine<sup>32</sup> laid neatly upon their bed. To her husband's great horror, Božena follows through with her scheme of fabricated pregnancy, thus tricking practically everyone into thinking she truly is expecting. Even food displays this unyielding commitment Božena has to her dream. Like Beauvoir's mothers who enthusiastically suffer pain from pregnancy,<sup>33</sup> Božena is determined, and even happy, to go through the discomfort of pregnancy, despite having an empty womb. For instance, although they make her physically ill, she eats pickles with whipped cream.<sup>34</sup> She does this, presumably, because legitimately pregnant women have similarly strange cravings.<sup>35</sup>

Alison Frank suggests that surrealist objects are directly connected to a character's subconscious obsessions. Therefore, it is only fitting that objects surrounding Božena are a substitute for the reproductive sex she never experiences. The pregnancy pillows are laid out on the bed she shares with her husband, suggesting that she has replaced all hope of sexual intimacy with a pursuit of fantastical motherhood. When Karel learns that she has informed the neighbours of her pregnancy, there is a close-up of Božena's hands pushing a needle through a buttonhole (an unmistakable reference to intercourse). These surrealist objects, like the baby clothes, are practical: she seems to be repairing a clothing item for Otik. Yet the shot of the needle entering the buttonhole occurs at the very moment when Božena says that she is pregnant. Here, Švankmajer demonstrates that material representations of sexual contact better illustrate a fictional pregnancy than an actual intercourse does.

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<sup>31</sup> Dryje, F, The Force of Imagination, in: *The Cinema of Jan Švankmajer: Dark Alchemy*. Ed. P. Hames, New York 2008, 143–203. She initiates “a game of ‘as if’ as [she] starts to treat the piece of wood as if it were a real living child”.

<sup>32</sup> These pillows, when placed underneath clothing, are intended to imitate a pregnant woman's growing womb. Each month is slightly larger than the next.

<sup>33</sup> Beauvoir, S., *The Second Sex*, 538. Many women “take intense pleasure in enduring” pregnancy.

<sup>34</sup> Like the milk and carrots that Otik voraciously consumes, the pickles and whipped cream are unmistakable allusions to both sexual activity and fertility: the phallic pickles are covered in a substance that closely resembles seminal fluid. In devouring these objects, Božena is simultaneously emanating both pregnancy and sexual virility.

<sup>35</sup> Because of these “cravings”, it is hardly a surprise that when the time to give birth comes, she screams as a result of her fake contractions. This occurs even when she is in the presence of only her husband, who is fully aware of their mutual barrenness.

Thus, the importance of the relationship between object and surrealism is demonstrated in Božena's case. Real-life encounters between her and her husband fall flat; no offspring can ever be produced in such a setting. The acceptance of surrealist objects as an extension of Božena's innermost dreams, on the other hand, propels her into a surrealist world in which infertile motherhood is possible.

## Escaping Sexual Abuse

The young girl Alžbětka also stumbles upon surrealist motherhood by way of sexual dysfunction. In her case, though, it is abuse, and not infertility, from which she suffers. In many ways, she is a victim of the myth that childhood is an ideal, innocent state. Despite complaining to both her mother and the caretaker about the sexually aggressive behaviour of Mr. Žlábek,<sup>36</sup> she is forced to endure his unwanted advances in isolation. Neither her mother nor the caretaker is willing to admit that such a feeble man could or would molest a young girl, and thus they both perpetuate the distorted concept of idealized adolescence, as Švankmajer would claim.<sup>37</sup> The Alžbětka of the real world is therefore stuck in an unprivileged childhood existence,<sup>38</sup> in which no one believes her cries for help.

With the help of objects Alžbětka also enters into surrealist interactions with the world around her. To Alžbětka, adolescence is a strange and dangerous mix of abuse, curiosity, and suspicion – all aspects that are reflected in objects around her. For example, each time he encounters her, the paedophile neighbour puts on his glasses. These not only allow him to see her better,<sup>39</sup> but they also trigger in Alžbětka a justified fear of sexual advances, as evidenced by her holding onto her

<sup>36</sup> It has already been noted that each time Žlábek sees Alžbětka, there is movement in his pants, and a reaching hand pops out. Further predatory behaviour is seen later when, upon seeing her peering into her neighbours' keyhole, he stretches his arms out to her partially exposed bottom. While no sexual abuse is present on screen, his reaction to seeing Alžbětka and her extreme discomfort upon meeting him both hint at an offstage abuse of a sexual nature.

<sup>37</sup> Richardson, M., *Surrealism and Cinema*, New York 2006, 131. There is a "deformed" perception "of childhood as a lost paradise", Švankmajer argues.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, 129.

<sup>39</sup> The significance of the paedophile's glasses is two-fold here. As stated above, they allow him to see more clearly the object of his sexual attraction. Yet, one should also consider a more surrealist approach to the lenses: serving as a sort of film through which suppressed desires may be perceived, the glasses are a passageway into a strange (and disturbing) world of realized dreams.

skirt whenever he reaches for her. Furthermore, her childlike curiosity to better understand the molestation of her body leads her to voraciously read a book on sexual dysfunction and infertility. This book provides more than adult-themed information, however. By using it as a booster seat at the dinner table, Alžbětka demonstrates a belief that the physicality of this object, like its contents, can help her reach adulthood. Finally, the cream-filled chocolate that Božena gives her stirs within the girl a deep sense of suspicion: fearing that the young couple's infertility is contagious, she drops the sweet and its sperm-like contents on the floor.

One could argue that these objects do not outline a surrealistic approach to Alžbětka's understanding of her environment, and that instead, they simply demonstrate the normal confusion and superstitions of an abused young girl on the verge of puberty. However, the author of this paper would claim that, in combination with one more object (that is, her fairy-tale book) the objects allow Alžbětka to take the leap from reality to fairy-tale, and thus do fall within the realm of surrealism. Her eager exchange of the sexual dysfunction book for this book of fairy-tales, in which she first reads the story of Otesánek, suggests that fantasy is just as believable to her as is reality. She neatly substitutes commentaries on slow sperm and infertility with details on Otesánek's insatiable hunger. Indeed, both topics seem to be given equal merit in Alžbětka's eyes; one is not more reliable or rational than the other.

Paralleling Božena's experiences, it is Alžbětka's abnormal interactions with her world that ultimately both propel her into surrealist motherhood and provide her an escape from sexual abuse. For example, claiming that it wet itself, she spansks her baby-doll, thus giving an inanimate object the agency to redirect shame away from herself.<sup>40</sup> At another point, she positions a ball under her shirt, in imitation of Božena's similarly fake pregnancy. This same object is seen bouncing down the stairs several times. By chasing the ball (as much a representation of early stages of motherhood as it is an imitation of a fetus), Alžbětka is able to literally run past the location where she typically encounters her abuser. In doing so, she avoids further painful situations. Finally, her incessant spying on Božena and Otík, as well as her

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<sup>40</sup> Certainly this example of fictionalized mothering indicates that Alžbětka's concept of motherhood is somewhat twisted from the beginning. By scolding a doll that, in her mind, failed to control its bladder, Alžbětka is imitating her own neuroses and in essence is transferring them over to a new generation (coincidentally, this is quite in keeping with Beauvoir's claims). Upon adopting Otík as her own child, Alžbětka displays similar transmission of neurotic behaviour. Perceiving Otík to be as isolated and ignored a figure as she, Alžbětka takes it upon herself to care for him, presumably so as to eliminate both her and his states of loneliness. Yet in complying with his extreme gluttony in order to emotionally support him, she parents no better than the Horáková's, whom she so strongly scrutinizes.

acceptance of Otik as a child long before he is “born”, preoccupies her.<sup>41</sup> This investigation of Božena’s unnatural motherhood distracts Alžbětka from the topic of sexual dysfunction. Eventually, her curiosity regarding Božena’s surrealist circumstances allows Alžbětka to accept the Otesánek fairy-tale as truth and to stand up to her abuser.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps most importantly, though, Alžbětka eventually begins her own state of motherhood with the stump child. Since motherhood is often associated with a lack of sexuality,<sup>43</sup> her transformation into Otik’s mother<sup>44</sup> allows her to shed her role as a sexual abuse victim. Therefore, both by accepting Božena’s fantastical motherhood and then by inheriting the role of Otik’s mother, Alžbětka finds an escape from the oppressive abuse of her childhood.

## Menopausal Birth

Správcová (the building’s caretaker) enters into surrealist motherhood from a slightly different angle than Božena and Alžbětka do. As a post-menopausal woman, she has, like Božena, no hope of naturally birthing a child. Yet Správcová does not seem to desire a human baby, specifically; instead, she transcends the barrenness of her womb by raising cabbages from seed.

Správcová’s process of growing these plants, while fragmented throughout the stories of the other two mothers, is painstakingly illustrated. One sees, for example, how the caretaker penetrates the dirt of the starter pots with her index finger, so as to create a nourishing spot for each seed. This penetration is the sexual act that allows the seeds to begin growing in a safe, womb-like environment. Later, the seeds are transferred to the harsher environment of the outdoors. Here, Správcová

<sup>41</sup> Alžbětka sees Otik in Božena’s lap while the latter is still supposedly pregnant. This prompts Alžbětka to ask her own mother whether humans, like kangaroos, can take babies out of their stomachs at will.

<sup>42</sup> While she is spying yet again on Božena, her neighbour, for a second time, attempts to grab her partially exposed behind. This time, however, she turns around and yells at him, thus scaring him off.

<sup>43</sup> Beauvoir, S., *The Second Sex*, 539. The breast of a pregnant woman, Beauvoir claims, is no longer “an erotic object” because it is now “a source of life”.

<sup>44</sup> At a later point in the film, Božena caves in to Karel’s demands and agrees to lock Otik in the dark and empty basement of their apartment building. It is here that Alžbětka comes face to face with Otik, and it is here that she feels sympathy for him. Shortly afterwards, she begins to mother him, providing him with toys, company, food, and discipline.

continues to look after them, hoeing out weeds and providing plenty of water. In many ways, these plants are her new-borns: they have exited the womb but still require close attention and care.

Because of her cabbage babies, Správcová is attuned to the natural process of growth in a way Božena never is. Božena is so desperate to mother Otik that she eliminates the ninth month of pregnancy altogether, giving “birth” instead to a premature baby. Správcová, on the other hand, understands the slow process of nature and the many months it takes for seeds to sprout and grow into adult plants. She patiently and calmly provides her cabbages with what they need until they are full size. In doing so, it is she, and not Božena, who embodies Beauvoir’s commentary on normal motherhood: directly involved in natural development, the cabbage mother transcends humanness by creating a symbiosis between animal and plant.<sup>45</sup>

The caretaker’s patience sets her apart not only from Božena, but also from Alžbětka, who is so eager to discard childhood that she adopts the role of mother before reaching puberty. Therefore, a viewer may initially be lulled into the assumption that the quiet caretaker demonstrates a non-savage example of surrealist motherhood. Indeed, Správcová seems to exist in a peaceful state of cabbage tending, removed from the frantic events in the apartments above. In fact, while she is passively connected to issues of brutality (she reports to the police the rapid disappearances of people whom Otik has consumed, for instance) there is little in the earlier actions of the caretaker that link her directly to violence.

All the same, in spite of her patient tendencies, Správcová is eventually forced to be violent, as foreshadowed by Alžbětka’s book of fairy-tales. Upon observing her garden patch littered with the sad remains of stolen cabbages, Správcová finally acknowledges the existence of Otik and marches downstairs, a hoe in hand, to defeat the destructive monster. It is this action of vengeance that demonstrates the depth of her commitment to gardening, and which allows her surrealist motherhood to take a violent turn. Like other objects in the film, Správcová’s cabbages are not just practical. They, too, are surrealist, and demonstrate a secret need of the caretaker,<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Beauvoir, S., *The Second Sex*, 538. “Snared by nature, [the pregnant woman] is plant and animal, a collection of colloids, an incubator, an egg,” Beauvoir states. While Božena and Alžbětka also unify animal and plant matter by accepting a tree stump as a baby, the difference here is that Správcová approaches the symbiosis in a natural way: her cabbages are *like* babies for her, but she does not trick herself into believing they are *actually* children with human characteristics.

<sup>46</sup> Frank, A., *Reframing Reality*, 21. “The surrealist object’s meaning is often mysterious and very personal”, Frank claims.

one that is never truly explained.<sup>47</sup> However, while the cabbages' particular meaning is never defined, their value to Správcová is clear: they are equivalent in worth to another person's child. Therefore, if destroyed, they may – and even ought to – be avenged.

## Savagery, Violence, and Cannibalism

Although the female characters' experiences with surrealist motherhood in *Little Otik* are unique from each other, one particular aspect unites them all together: when their innermost dreams are realized, disaster is imminent. Indeed, all three examples of motherhood end in both physical and emotional destruction. For instance, in spite of endless signs that Otik is a voracious monster, Božena stubbornly defends Otik's actions. When he eats her hair, she worries about him choking; when he devours her cat, she states the animal was old and would have died soon anyways; when he consumes the mailman and social worker, Božena, while traumatized, still remains adamantly opposed to her husband's wishes to end Otik's existence.<sup>48</sup> Her folkloric (that is, her simplistically unchanging) support of Otik in light of violent and cannibalistic acts proves that her desire for reproduction has taken precedence over everything else. She has been given the opportunity to mother, in spite of infertility, and she will never abandon her new state. In the battle between human life and surrealist motherhood, Božena chooses the latter. She thus seals the fate of the cat, the postman, the social worker, the paedophile, and ultimately her husband and herself, as well.

Alžbětka demonstrates similar commitment to preserving Otik's life despite his violent acts. Thanks to her fairy-tale book, she knows quite well of Otik's ravenous appetite for human flesh. Yet she still takes Otik under her wing and provides for him. Like Božena, once she has escaped her problems through this distorted form of motherhood, Alžbětka cannot go back. Realizing she can no longer feed him from her parents' fridge, she resorts to a savage solution that calls to mind the European folktale: using matches to symbolize all the inhabitants of the building (including her own parents), she picks at random who will serve as Otik's next

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<sup>47</sup> I would claim that the main incentive behind the caretaker's gardening is to transcend menopause. Other motivations certainly are possible, but one simply cannot know for sure without further background information on her life.

<sup>48</sup> Dryje, F., *The Force of Imagination*, 192. Or, as Dryje puts it, to "kill the unmanageable glutton".



meal. In doing so, she takes Božena's passive acceptance of cannibalistic acts to another, more disturbing level. Unlike her older counterpoint, then, Alžbětka fully recognizes Otik's desire for flesh and ultimately sacrifices human life for him, first by luring her abuser to Otik's dark corner, and then by notifying Otik of his approaching father.

In consideration of all the destruction Otik causes, it may be tempting to regard the caretaker's act of revenge as beneficial. After all, she is the only one who breaks the growing trend of violence and rids the world of a deadly monster. Yet one must also examine how her vengeance affects the young Alžbětka. Otik has served as a means to an end for the girl. He has permitted her to shed her victimized skin and become a non-sexual mother, and thus he is an essential aspect of this non-sexuality. Indeed, although her abuser is no longer a threat, having been consumed by a folkloric form of punishment, Alžbětka's position at the end of the film as a non-erotic mother relies heavily on Otik's existence and need for care. In accepting the real presence of a fictional figure (Otik as Otesánek), Alžbětka has grown emotionally attached to folkloric extremes, in terms of both punishment and basic interactions. Her role as a mother is structured heavily around Otik's demands of playtime and feeding, and, without Otik to nurture, Alžbětka is at risk of reverting to a restrictive childhood.

Správcová, therefore, causes emotional damage on Alžbětka by attacking Otik: she eliminates the main source of structure, comfort, and affection in the young girl's life. On the delicate edge between childhood and adulthood, Alžbětka is doomed by the caretaker's actions to tumble back into the frightening and isolating world of adolescence. There, she has no one to provide for, no one to distract her from thoughts on sexual dysfunction, and no one whom she can truly trust.<sup>49</sup> Because of the caretaker's vengeance, Alžbětka is thus violently ripped from adulthood before she is given much chance to grow.

## Conclusions

Incorporating various historical and literary elements into his fictional world, Švankmajer creates a remarkable example of surrealism in *Little Otik*. It is within this surrealist framework that Švankmajer allows three of his female characters to see their most secret desires come to fruition. Whether stemming from overcoming

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<sup>49</sup> In taking revenge, Správcová goes back on her promise to passively listen to Alžbětka's fairy-tale, therefore betraying the girl's faith in adults.

infertility, from escaping sexual abuse, or from transcending menopause, the realization of desires results in a motherhood that is quite miraculous. Indeed, it would be impossible to see similar examples of motherhood in a non-surrealist and more realistic setting.

Yet these unnatural surrealist phenomena are more than just miraculous; they also magnify and intensify the darker sides of inner yearnings, and thus ultimately lead to violence and brutality. Božena is repeatedly given a chance to face the savagery of her son but she never does so. In fact, her obsession with abnormal motherhood ends only once Otik has consumed her. Alžbětka is a similarly questionable guardian. She would rather sacrifice her own parents to Otik's bottomless stomach than abandon her newfound role as an asexual mother. Finally, the caretaker falls back on a promise when she avenges the destruction of her cabbages. The effect on Alžbětka is severe emotional anguish, instability, and, more than likely, developmental regression.<sup>50</sup> As surrealism gives such great agency to innermost desires and aspirations, the final result of granting the deepest of wishes is a complete disdain for physical and mental safety. In the end, the surrealist motherhood of *Little Otik* is nothing other than violent, brutal, and even cannibalistic.

## ABSTRACT

### **Infertility, Abuse, and Menopause: Surrealist Motherhood in Jan Švankmajer's *Little Otik***

*Amanda K. Fisher*

Jan Švankmajer's surrealist film *Little Otik* (2000) portrays a devastating and atypical model of motherhood. Božena Horáková, the main female character, suffers from infertility and adopts a tree stump, which soon comes alive and starts consuming people. A little later, Božena's neighbour, Alžbětka, who is trying to escape from sexual abuse, takes over as the stump Otik's second mother. Meanwhile, the old housekeeper at their apartment building attempts to grow cabbage, but when Otik destroys her garden, she takes violent revenge for her "children's" death. Jan Švankmajer uses typical surrealist methods to prove that artificial motherhood – motherhood

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<sup>50</sup> Of course, the film ends before this character is further developed, but nevertheless the trajectory towards regression seems fairly clear.

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despite infertility and menopause or as a result of violence – will eventually prove to be vicious and destructive.

**Key words:** Jan Švankmajer, *Little Otik*, surrealist motherhood, Alžbětka, Božena Horáková

## АННОТАЦИЯ

### **Бесплодие, насилие и менопауза: сюрреалистическое материнство в фильме Яна Шванкмайера «Полено»**

*Аманда К. Фишер*

В своем сюрреалистическом фильме «Полено» (2000) Ян Шванкмайер представляет нетипичный и разрушительный вариант материнства. Главная героиня фильма, страдающая бесплодием Божена Горакова, усыновляет пень, который в скором времени оживает и начинает поедать все вокруг, включая людей. Соседская девочка Альжбетка, спасаясь от сексуального насилия, позже становится второй матерью пня Отика. Старая смотрительница их дома пассивно выращивает из семян капусту, но после того, как Отик уничтожает ее сад, она яростно мстит за смерть своих «детей». Используя типичные сюрреалистические методы, Ян Шванкмайер доказывает, что искусственное материнство, т.е. материнство вопреки бесплодию и менопаузе или как результат насилия, в конечном итоге оказывается порочным и разрушительным.

**Ключевые слова:** Ян Шванкмайер, «Полено», сюрреалистическое материнство, Альжбетка, Божена Горакова