

Rising above oppressive circumstances in Jan Svankmajer's "Alice"

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Abstract: This is a Wonderland of cruelty and discomfort, where filth and loneliness rule. Yet for all that, Alice retains her sense of pluck and curiosity. Alice doesn't have the verbal self-confidence I remember from the book, but she fights back against the weird forces of this dreamlike world and never gives up in trying to get that white rabbit to listen to her. Alice is redeemed by her strong spirit. One gets the impression that she was born to rise above her sad circumstances in life -- and that makes her a hero worth supporting. Alice learns that we live in a difficult and threatening world but she rises above this by fighting back and never being daunted by oppressive circumstances. In life similarly we face a harsh world but it is up to us to fight back and rise above oppressive situations.

Keywords: Alice, Wonderland, Nightmare, Dread, Cruelty

This film mixes the live action of just one actress - Alice - with a ghoulish array of stop-motion animated characters and objects. Whereas Lewis Carroll's original "Alice in Wonderland" story is a celebration of childhood innocence, fantasy, and magical belief, Svankmajer's "Alice" tells the reverse - the loss of childhood innocence through the pain of coming to terms with a reduced magical world. Inspired by the original tale, Svankmajer uses Carroll's idea of a childishly fantastic and wild dream to represent an escape from a tortured and painful childhood, rather

than a daydreaming fantasy in the sun.

With very little dialogue at all, Alice's job as an actress is restricted entirely to responding appropriately to the puppets - which involves no more than recoiling or widening her eyes. This takes nothing away from the film, however; Alice's muteness is a reflection of the classic "children should be seen and not heard" oppressive school of parenting. Indeed, Alice is seen throughout the film to, despite the hellish surroundings, still wipe her feet on doormats, remove her shoes before entering rooms, and do as she is told. She has been brought up through a harsh discipline that keeps her mute, polite, under control and unquestioning - indeed the very first scene of the film shows her older sister wordlessly slap her for being curious as to the contents of a book. This oppressive discipline is part of what makes up Alice's despondent reality, and hence is part of what she is both trying to escape and rebel from by dreaming.

The sad result is that even Alice's dreams are tortured. Children can only dream about the things presented to them in reality. In the first scenes of the film, the camera pans across Alice's room and displays all the junk carelessly surrounding her - a keen viewer will notice that these are the very same objects that Svankmajer later animates inside Alice's dream. It is precisely because Alice's real world is so abysmal that her dream reflects it. Her house seems devoid of life - we never see any parents, and the sister is still



out by the riverside - and the house itself is claustrophobic, dark and utterly unfit for human habitation. The ornaments are stuffed bugs, the only visible food is being pickled in tightly clasped jars, and every single surface is smothered in brown grime. The lack of any other life in the house and the lack of any form of homely care, all depict a tragedy of childhood neglect - Svankmajer blames the nightmare entirely on the parents.

Within her dream, Alice suddenly finds that her room expands outwards into an endless muddy plain. This expanse, a dream of freedom, is tragically desolate and uninviting. Nevertheless, she follows one of her now-animated "toys" (the white rabbit) out into the field. Over the course of the film she will meet with a sailing rat, a truly insane depiction of the Mad Hatter and March Hare, and the murderous Queen of Hearts. But ultimately these are only the dream-animated versions of toys Alice detests. The truly sinister characters in her dream are those that come directly from her house, her life. The pickled jars of food turn out to be mixed with drawing pins, the "Drink Me" and "Eat Me" potions and cakes are bottles of ink and nondescript tarts, a mousetrap spells the demise of the sailing rat; when left on her own in a room, its contents attack her - slabs of meat slither around, bread turns to a porcupine of nails, food cans turn out to contain the stuffed beetles used as ornaments in her house (now living).

It is in this scene that Alice first starts to experience some symbolic victory. Throughout the film we see Alice begin to show more curiosity, begin to learn, begin to rebel against what she is told to do, and begin - most importantly - to come to terms with her surroundings. She is ultimately locked away in a dark room - the culmination of all the negative

forces around her - trapped inside a doll of herself. Nothing could be more symbolic of the repressive upbringing that has spawned this twisted dream. She has realised that she's been made into a doll - inhuman. It is with this realisation that Alice achieves her first rebellion, tearing her way out of the doll and - through unhindered curiosity - discovers the key to leave the room by.

We are constantly reminded that the dream is a learning process for Alice. Every single time there is dialogue within the film, we immediately see Alice's lips say the words "...the March Hare said", or "...Alice thought to herself". These metatextual scenes suggest Alice is fully aware that this is all a story of her own imaginings. At bare minimum, it suggests that Alice has a level of awareness that oversees the story as a whole - she is looking upon these events with some purpose.

Alice wakes from her dream a changed person. She has grown up the hard way - her last vain attempt at a childish fantasy built from her unremarkable life has led her to come to terms with how reality really is. She has learnt that we cannot be mute and polite little girls - the world will attack us, and we must defend ourselves. It's a sorry world-view she ends up with, but one necessary for her to be able to live in the neglected environment she's been brought up in. Thus the film ends with her own decision and dialogue - "the rabbit is late again" - she snaps a pair of scissors - "perhaps I'll cut his head off".

Of all the adaptations of 'Alice in Wonderland', Jan Svankmajer's is the darkest, the most surreal and the most bizarre. As well as the most original, while remarkably staying true to the book's spirit and maintaining most crucial details and characters.



'Alice's' dialogue and way of narrating does get annoyingly repetitive and is at times unnecessary. It is also a shame about the omission of The Cheshire Cat, one of the book's best characters and often a breath-of-fresh-air scene-stealer.

However, 'Alice' looks stunning with lovingly detailed austere dilapidated interior sets and so many of the stop-motion images, surreal in nature, are fantastically nightmarish (like the fish, skeleton birds and the raw meat), complete with beautiful and atmospheric cinematography. The soundtrack consists of loud, continuous sound effects, that add very well to the strangeness and eeriness.

Svankmajer's style shines through loud and clear while still not masking Carroll's storytelling which shines brighter even with the darker tone and modern setting (rather than the dream-like picturesque one). Some may consider the story rambling and episodic, as timeless as the book is it does have an episodic nature so that respect was appropriate. This episodic nature was put to good and imaginative use here, and there are some great scenes especially the Caterpillar and the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. The wonderland characters make their impact, especially White Rabbit in an expanded role and the awesome Caterpillar.

The condition of Alice's home situation suggests strongly that she is a lonely child quite often. There is an air of neglect about her room and all the objects in it; Alice herself isn't the squeaky-clean, outspoken child so often interpreted from the book. Her toys look old and tattered, as if from a rummage sale. There is a layer of smudge/filth covering nearly every surface. Left to herself, it is no wonder she must develop an

unusually active imagination in order to brighten her circumstances.

This re-imagining of Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland is fantastic and dark in similar measure. The genius of the director's vision lies in the way he faithfully follows the source material's plot, while at the same time turning our Disney-inspired, preconceived notion of this tale on its head. You see the setting is actually a dilapidated old house -- bare wood floors host rooms devoid of decoration, often containing a single naked bulb as the light source and a lone writing desk of unknown purpose. The animal characters are stop-motion compositions of bare animal bones and household items; skulls wrongly attached to other animal skeletons and bodies, given rolling glass eyes to add facial expression of sorts and "life" likeness. Everything is scruffy, dirty, worn, and badly in need of some comforting homeliness.

Alice follows the white rabbit (a stuffed and mounted specimen which comes to life and pulls its feet from the display case by yanking the nails out first) from one room to the next on her adventure. She's not a very emotive Alice, reacting blankly to all the bizarreness; once or twice there is a closeup of her widening eyes. It's almost as if she's a doll. We see her lips mouthing the phrases "Said the White Rabbit", "Demanded the Mad Hatter", etc. throughout the narrative, which is our broadest hint that this is all Alice's show--her mind at play within the environment she knows well.

This is a Wonderland of cruelty and discomfort, where filth and loneliness rule. Yet for all that, Alice retains her sense of pluck and curiosity. Alice doesn't have the verbal self-confidence I remember from the book, but she fights back against the weird forces of this dreamlike world



and never gives up in trying to get that white rabbit to listen to her. Alice is redeemed by her strong spirit. One gets the impression that she was born to rise above her sad circumstances in life -- and that makes her a hero worth supporting. Alice learns that we live in a difficult

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