

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DARKNESS VISIBLE: CONTEMPORARY STOP MOTION ANIMATION AND THE  
UNCANNY

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**ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY**

**ABSTRACT**

**FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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UNCANNY**

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This thesis seeks to demonstrate that the uncanny and stop motion animation enjoy a special relationship, one characterised by a sense of darkness becoming visible. A range of scholars, including Barbara Creed, Tom Gunning, and Laura Mulvey, have recognised that film is capable of embodying the dark fears and concerns related to the collapsing of boundaries and merging of oppositions that are characteristic of the uncanny. Stop motion, this research argues, is a form that is written through with uncanniness. Stop motion animation is especially capable of conveying an experience of the uncanny because of the technical processes through which an impression of movement and life is created from stillness, inertia and death.

The thesis explores its claims through in-depth investigation of Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay on the uncanny, and a range of critical and literary texts and intertexts - including the work of Edgar Allan Poe, Stanislaw Lem, John Milton and Georges Bataille - which engage with different aspects of the uncanny, the death drive, and the human psyche. In tandem with these thinkers, the thesis investigates the work of filmmakers who have shown a willingness to fully engage with the darkness inherent in stop motion, and with the phenomenon of the uncanny, including Shinya Tsukamoto, Jan Švankmajer and the Quay Brothers. Collectively, this thesis argues, these writers, thinkers, and visual artists articulate a common interest in the darkness that characterises both the uncanny and stop motion: a predilection for rendering darkness visible.

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# **Introduction:**

## **Opening the Door**

To make the invisible visible is uncanny (de Man 1986, p.49).

Stop-motion has always lent itself to the dark side (The Guardian, 2016).

This thesis is an interdisciplinary study of the relationship between the phenomenon known as ‘the uncanny’, the form of film animation commonly referred to as ‘stop motion’, and the unsettling darkness they both traverse. It is about the collapse of borders, a blurring between supposed opposites and troubling visions of fears long repressed becoming manifest. It is concerned with the return of the familiar in unfamiliar form, and obscure corners of the human psyche rediscovered, enclaves where primal and pre-adult anxieties and urges concerning mortality and the drive towards death reside. To make such darkness visible is profoundly uncanny, as Paul de Man observes in his book *The Resistance to Theory*. De Man echoes the words of Sigmund Freud from his 1919 essay ‘The Uncanny’, where he writes that *das Unheimliche*, ‘the unhomely’ – or uncanny, when translated from the original German into English – ‘is in some way a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, “the homely”)’ (2003, p.134), particularly where it is concerned with ‘the notion of the hidden and the dangerous’ and how it ‘has come into the open’ (2003, pp. 132 & 134). Freud describes the ‘fear and dread’ that are symptomatic of the uncanny experience, and marks it out from other categories in the ‘field of the frightening’ by explaining that it ‘goes back to what was once known and had long been familiar’ (2003, pp. 123 & 124). He later adds that ‘the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death’ (2003, p.148).

The uncanny occupies a liminal space at the threshold of perception. As a phenomenon associated with the unlocking of a particular set of repressed fears, exploration of its domain could perhaps best be symbolised by the opening of a door, and the sudden exposure to darkness, disorientation, and uncertainty that occurs as a result. The validity of the metaphor is demonstrated by Freud himself at the very end of his notes for 'The Uncanny'. He recounts an incident from his own past of a train journey, in which a door 'swung open' to reveal what he thought was a stranger, entering his compartment (2003, p.162). 'I jumped up to put him right', he recalls 'but soon realized to my astonishment that the intruder was my own image, reflected in the mirror on the connecting door' (2003, p.162). Freud questions whether his reaction to this particular example of a door opening is 'perhaps a vestige of the archaic reaction to the "double" as something uncanny' (2003, p.162). The opening door becomes a portal through which a past fear comes back to haunt him, in the shape of the uncanny. The image of the door, and the incident that sticks in Freud's memory, are representative of how this particular species of the frightening creeps back in to consciousness through the cracks and fissures in the civilised veneer of the psyche, to discomfiting, disturbing effect.

What follows is a study that looks in more detail at what becomes visible in the darkness when the metaphorical 'door' is opened and the hidden fears associated with the uncanny are laid bare. The thesis examines the forms taken by the uncanny in greater depth, primarily through the prism of Freud's original essay on the topic, which is the template for much of the academic work written about the uncanny. It does so by focusing on a medium that, this thesis argues, is ideally suited to present uncanniness visually. Stop motion animation can be taken to resemble the uncanny in many respects, as an art form that defies boundaries and resists definition. Whilst its subjects appear imbued with the spark of the kinetic and a semblance of life, stop motion simultaneously embodies the spectre of inertia, lifelessness and death. It is both stop and motion, in the instant. As such it epitomises the return of those

fears of mortality, death and darkness that are repressed, and which re-emerge in uncertain, uncanny forms.

Existing scholarship has noted an affinity between stop motion animation and the uncanny (Bendazzi, 1994; Brown, 2010; Halberstam, 2011; Comiskey, 2015; Manning, 2016) but has stopped short of extensive analysis. In a chapter on stop motion for her book *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*, for instance, Maureen Furniss writes of how it is ‘apt’ to provoke the uncanny ‘experience’ (2007, p.165). She adds, however, that ‘the notion of the uncanny is a bit too theoretical for an in-depth investigation within this book’ (2007, p.165). This thesis represents the first effort to fully explore stop motion’s engagement with the uncanny. It will read stop motion as a technical process that provides a unique insight into the darkness other forms of filmmaking seek to obscure, and which is characterised by those primal and childhood fears that, as Freud describes it, ‘evoke in us a sense of the uncanny’ (2003, p.124). The chapters that follow explore this darkness through examples from the films of those who continue to utilise elements of stop motion, as either an accompaniment to live action or as the main driver of the narrative.

Importantly, the work of other writers and thinkers is included as part of an interdisciplinary approach, which both provides enrichment and gives a wider context to the dark ideas interrogated by Freud’s essay on ‘The Uncanny’ and the stop motion animators in question. The overall aim of the thesis is to illustrate how, in both form and content, stop motion personifies the themes which are central to Freud’s vision for the uncanny, and which have also been addressed by authors and academics from a variety of fields. They include Georges Bataille, Edgar Allan Poe, Bruno Schulz, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Stanislaw Lem, Lewis Carroll and John Milton. Their inclusion is predicated on the basis of a shared interest in the associated concepts of the uncanny, the stop and the motion, and the death drive, and their elaboration of what Milton refers to as the ‘darkness visible’ (2008, p.5), the point at which



hidden aspects of the psyche become palpable. This thesis makes the case that, despite their differences, these writers can be considered together under the rubric of a shared attraction to the base, repressed, or overlooked elements of human experience.

The Surrealist writing of Georges Bataille, in particular, makes a key contribution to this research. Bataille had a dynamic and proactive view of confronting the dark. In praise of Gnosticism, for instance, he writes of the order's 'sinister love of darkness' (2008, p.48), with its 'eternal autonomous existence' (2008, p.47), darkness as an entity in its own right. In opening themselves up to the dark, and what Bataille refers to as 'a baseness that would not be reducible, which would be owed the most indecent respect' (2008, p.48), the Gnostics could be perceived as freeing themselves from the restraints of living solely in the light of a higher power emanating from above. And in the radical representations of the art they left behind, writes Bataille, 'it is possible to see the image of this base matter that alone, by its incongruity and by an overwhelming lack of respect, permits the intellect to escape from the constraints of idealism' (2008, p.51). Bataille would take these beliefs and adapt them into his own work across a lifetime, excavating what could be described as the darkest recesses of the human psyche and laying bare its most primal urges, instincts and fears. His work could be defined as consistently observing and commenting on the proclivity of the primal and the base, the darkness within, to resurface at any given moment and how that is something to be embraced. It bears marked similarities to the way repressed fears and ideas emerge without warning in the dark shape of the uncanny. The respective historical and cultural backdrops against which stop motion animation, the uncanny and Bataille's preoccupations took shape are explained concisely here and in more detail in Chapter 1, clarifying where and how their interests converge.

## **The What & How of Stop Motion Animation**

A technique virtually as old as cinema itself, stop motion animation is reputed to be the accidental discovery of Georges Méliès (Wells 1998, p.13; Cook 2004, p.940). In his book *The Art of Stop-Motion Animation* Ken A. Priebe describes how:

According to legend, French stage musician and amateur filmmaker Georges Méliès was shooting a street scene when the film got stuck in the camera gate. During the process of fixing the problem, life continued on as normal on the street and, once the camera was fixed, Méliès continued filming where he left off. In the final film he was amazed to find that pedestrians and vehicles had instantly transformed, or jumped, from one side of the street to another. This experiment led to the idea of deliberately stopping the camera, changing elements of the scene, and starting it up again to create illusions of transformation (2006, p.9).

It was this act of ‘stopping the camera’, in order to simulate the appearance of movement from one frame to the next, that is purported to have given the medium its name, and it continues to be the foundation for the process by which stop motion animation is created today. Stop motion traditionally involves the intricate, incremental manipulation of three-dimensional models, objects such as stones or toys, and even people. The isolated positions in which the subject is photographed, during what are often extremely slow filming processes, come together and form something akin to actual movement in the final edit. The result is an eerie impression of life, which imitates whilst not quite duplicating true dynamism.

This is an important distinction. The appearance of life as presented in the stop motion sequence often feels curiously stylised and otherworldly, a wondrous and yet slightly off-kilter simulation borne from inertia. As viewers we are, perhaps, conscious of the constant presence of the ‘stop’ which we catch momentarily behind the motion, and this is most likely an effect of art versus biology. The simple fact is that, as sentient beings we rarely think through each increment of our movement; instead, the work of putting one foot in front of the other is internalised, and taken for granted. The deconstructing process whereby stop motion animation is created, by contrast, imbues its subjects with a deliberateness that is unnatural.

As a result, we are left viewing something that seems to be alive but at the same time we question its sentience. It is familiar yet unfamiliar in the same moment, and this engenders a sense of the uncanny in stop motion, which, this thesis argues, has in turn informed the way stop motion animators approach the themes and narratives of their films.

Barry Purves states that, in order for stop motion to achieve its kinetic illusion the animator must ‘give the movement as much detail as possible’ (2010, p.20). They must also ‘really spell out every bit of movement’ by ‘over-emphasising elements in the animation’ (2010, p.20), an approach which replaces the ‘trailing blur’ that occurs in live action and suggests a trajectory for the subject (2010, p.20). These two techniques are a key component in why stop motion can often invoke a sense of uncanniness. The detail endows the animation with an air of familiarity, as it more closely approximates the intricacies of real movement, and a simultaneous impression of unfamiliarity because its particularity can appear overly studied. Similarly, the exaggeration of motion familiarises by imitating live action, but at the same time its actions are made strange by being bigger than life.

There are several key subtypes within stop motion which will form part of this thesis, and these are commonly defined as clay and puppet animation, pixilation and object animation. Clay and puppet animation both use figures specifically created for the purposes of a particular film, and which are intended to appear human- or animal-like; they are also regularly used to give the appearance of life to supernatural or monstrous beings. The advantage of using clay or designed puppets is the flexibility of the materials: they can be moulded or made to assume an acquired shape. Each figure will usually require a metal skeleton, or armature, that supports the clay, or materials used to form the façade of the puppet, and which facilitates its movement between photographed ‘stops’, thus simulating movement. A well-known example of clay animation would be the *Wallace and Gromit* films produced by the British company Aardman (1989-2008), where the duo are thrown into

various scenarios of slapstick jeopardy. Puppet animations are best exemplified by the original version of *King Kong* (Cooper and Schoedsack, 1933) or *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (Selick, 1994), both of which feature a range of unsettling puppet monsters interacting. All three of these examples, and the uncanniness of their figurations, will be discussed at greater length later in the thesis.

Pixilation presents a unique set of challenges for both actors and animators, as it necessitates the photographing of live action subjects in various still poses that they are required to hold, before their position is changed slightly in the next frame. It effectively transforms a living actor into a puppet to be manipulated, with all the uncanniness that suggests – a blurring of boundaries between the animate and inanimate, manipulation by external forces, and so on. Pixilation has been utilised in a number of music videos, most famously in the short film created for Peter Gabriel's 'Sledgehammer' (Johnson, 1986) where his head and mouth are incrementally moved to create the illusion that he is singing the words of the song. Shinya Tsukamoto has used pixilation techniques in his *Tetsuo* films to decidedly uncanny effect, as will be explored in the chapter devoted to his stop motion work.

The main distinguishing characteristic of object animation is that is concerned only with bringing existing objects to some semblance of 'life', rather than purposely fashioned models which resemble sentient beings, or people who resemble puppets. Among the things most often made to seem kinetic by object animation are toys and dolls, but animators have used the technique on everything from furniture to bathtubs, cutlery and broken watches. Object animation is the form that can be most closely tied to those notions of the 'hidden' becoming visible that are integral to the uncanny by suggesting that an object has become possessed of an inner 'life', and it is often accompanied by a sense of unpredictability, which can be compounded by an aura of danger. Dangerous objects routinely spring to apparent 'life' in

the films of Jan Švankmajer, for instance. Their various manifestations are central to two chapters in this study which examine Švankmajer's work.

Although these classifications of stop motion seem clearly defined it is important to highlight that their use is often marked by the uncanny elision of borders between them. It would be relatively unusual to see one kind used exclusively: an animator would be more likely to employ two or three in any given film, and frequently in the same sequence. The video for 'Sledgehammer', for instance, features object animation combined with Peter Gabriel's pixilated head; and a number of the films by the Quay Brothers are characterised by puppet animation alongside that of objects. By layering the animations together in this way, filmmakers can give their diegetic world a sense of its own inner 'realism', but this can also intensify the feeling of what Barry Purves describes as 'something shamanistic' that accompanies a stop motion film (2010, p.8).

The word 'shamanistic' implies a connection to an ancient tradition of magic and mysticism, a universe marked by the endowment of all things with their own spirit, their own inner life. Such beliefs engage with both the primal and with childhood, the interactive play in which a child gives actions and voices to lifeless objects in effect echoing the primitive's attribution of life to everything around them. The 'shamanism' that is perceptible in a stop motion film, however, can often take on malevolent forms. As Purves writes, the animations in stop motion are imbued with 'something that connects immediately to childhood games and, perhaps, to darker fantasies' (2010, p.8). They have the potential to open the door to those repressed thoughts and fears that are waiting to be reawoken, or more pointedly reanimated, from their slumber.

## **Freud & 'The Uncanny'**

In a manner appropriate to the entity itself, the concept of the uncanny remains largely undefined and nebulous in written accounts until the early 1900s. It is important to note, however, that its characteristics are discernible long before that time. The disconcerting experiences of Satan that Milton depicts in *Paradise Lost*, published in 1667, offer one example of a writer putting into words an uncanny impression, as concepts of darkness and death merge with those of light and life, accompanied by a sense of unease that emerges from seeing something long repressed suddenly revealed. Milton describes it thus:

round he throws his baleful eyes  
That witnessed huge affliction and dismay  
Mixed with obdurate pride and steadfast hate:  
At once as far as angels' ken he views  
The dismal situation waste and wild,  
A dungeon horrible, on all sides round  
As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames  
No light, but rather darkness visible  
Served only to discover sights of woe (2008, p.5).

The strange, yet all too familiar horrors unveiled to Satan in the 'darkness visible' around him bear significant resemblance to the uncanny, and are indicative of something waiting to be named, a perceptible presence reaching out across centuries of evolution. The affinity apparent in this passage between Milton's ostensibly peculiar oxymoron and the uncanny is touched upon by John Creaser in *The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost* where, in a chapter entitled 'The Line in Paradise Lost' he writes that 'the line-turn at "from those flames" reveals uncannily that they give off "No light", and then more horrors are discovered from the still more uncanny "darkness visible"' (2014, p.90). Milton's words seem to echo the uncanny notion of oppositions coming together and bleeding into each other, the familiar and unfamiliar made indistinguishable from each other.

In terms of its development as a theoretical concept across the last hundred years or so, philosopher Martin Heidegger was prominent among those who would use the uncanny to formulate their own theories in the early part of the 20th century, associating notions of *angst*

with uncanniness in his 1927 book *Being & Time*. A number of Structuralists and Post-structuralists have subsequently adopted the uncanny as a way of thinking about the relationship between the reader, the author and the text. Jacques Lacan, for instance, used uncanniness as the basis for much of his psychoanalytic work on anxiety in the 1960s and 1970s: in one example, he examined how the object of our look can instil a sense of the uncanny when gazing back at us (1977). Julia Kristeva would develop her ideas about abjection in relation to the notion of the uncanny in *Powers of Horror* (1982), and both Paul De Man and Jacques Derrida have tackled the uncanny from the perspective of the process of writing, and the deconstruction of the text (*The Resistance to Theory*, 1986; *Specters of Marx*, 1994). The concept of the uncanny has likewise been taken up in other theoretical frameworks: Masahiro Mori introduced the theory of the ‘uncanny valley’ when writing about robotics in 1970; Anthony Vidler has viewed uncanniness from the perspective of contemporary buildings and the home in *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992); and Barbara Creed has explored gender issues in relation to the uncanny through analysis of the horror film genre in books such as *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror and the Primal Uncanny* (2005). But it was Sigmund Freud who, by developing significantly ideas expressed by Ernst Jentsch, would first attempt to formulate and identify what constitutes ‘The Uncanny’ in his 1919 essay.

‘The Uncanny’, as Freud perceives it, ‘belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread’ (2003, p.123), and in seeking to distinguish the phenomenon from other literary and artistic terms he asserts that it ‘goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar’ to us (2003, p.124), an *idée fixe* carried inside ‘that has been repressed and then reappears’ and belongs ‘to the prehistory of the individual and the race’ (2003, p.152). As Freud reminds us, a foundational tenet of modernity is the emphasis on notions of progress and forward motion, but the uncanny momentarily jerks us back. Borne

out of the fears and phobias within that perpetually bind us to the cave and the womb, and which cling on through evolution and maturation, the uncanny lingers, waiting to catch us off guard. When it does, ‘persons and things, sense impressions, processes and situations’ (2003, p.124) abruptly arouse ‘an especially strong and distinct sense of the uncanny in us’ (2003, p.135).

Freud’s list of categories for manifestations of the uncanny is revised throughout the essay with various supplements, additions and asides, and it includes ‘animism, magic, sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts (and) unintended repetition’ (2003, p.149). It is augmented throughout by additional examples, such as ‘the concept of the double’ (2003, p.142), ‘anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts’ (2003, p.148) and ‘automatic – mechanical – processes that may lie hidden behind the familiar image of a living person’ (2003, p.135). Even darkness is referred to in several passages as the trigger for an ‘uncanny effect’ (2003, p.153). More explanation of these terms in the context of Freud’s essay is provided in Chapter 1.

What becomes clear from ‘The Uncanny’ as it proceeds is that Freud is not entirely comfortable discussing this topic; this could explain why there are so many supplements and additions – and why, as commentators such as Hélène Cixous (1976) and Nicholas Royle (2003) have suggested, there are also gaps and omissions. His essay endeavours to articulate the processes of the uncanny, and to pin down the nuances of the phenomenon; the struggle he undergoes whilst doing so, however, is palpable. As a psychoanalyst, Freud’s method is to employ taxonomy and defining techniques in an effort to contain the concept, but it quickly becomes clear that it defies such restraint. ‘To write about the uncanny’, states Nicholas Royle in his book on the subject ‘is to lose one’s bearings, to find oneself immersed in the maddening logic of the supplement, to engage with a hydra’ (2004, p.8). Bringing clarification to such an amorphous beast is not a straightforward task, and there is a definite



sense in which Freud appears to surrender to the destabilising spirit of the uncanny somewhat – becoming entangled in his own statements, doubling back to rephrase and skimming across cracks that open at every twist and turn. For instance, in tackling the uncanny sensation generated when we are unsure ‘as to whether something is animate or inanimate’ (2003, p.141) Freud struggles to distinguish between derivations from ‘an infantile fear’, from ‘an infantile wish’ and ‘simply from an infantile belief’, ultimately confessing ‘this sounds like a contradiction’ (2003, p.141).

At times Part III of the essay begins to sound like a set of disclaimers and exceptions to rules he has delineated in Part II. His statement that ‘for nearly every example we have adduced in support of our thesis an analogous one can be found to counter it’ (2003, p.152) exemplifies the tone in this section. Moreover, throughout the work Freud repeatedly finds himself employing phrases such as ‘increasingly ambivalent’ (2003, p.134) and ‘on the other hand’, with ‘yet’ and ‘however’ opening up fissures of doubt at the beginning of proceeding statements. It is as if the essay has been permeated with an indelible sense of its own uncanniness; and under such conditions it becomes possible to conceive that what remains unwritten but lies skulking between the lines and in the margins of its pages has a potency that is the equal of the visible word. This notion of tensions between manifest and latent meaning, between form and what Georges Bataille identifies as *l’informe*, the ‘formless’, in a dictionary definition for the *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, will be explored in greater depth as this research progresses (1995, p.51). The phenomenon of the uncanny seems possessed of a strange liminality that defies framing and taxonomy, and this makes Freud’s attempts to contain it quite fitting, and strangely endearing; standing in its indeterminate, unpredictable shadow Freud appears as human as the rest of us, destabilised and somewhat overwhelmed.

One of the causes for this may be that Freud is, consciously or not, resisting discussion of an idea that would develop into something more formalised in his published work shortly

thereafter. The Freudian conception for 'The Uncanny' emerged as the articulation of a problem he hadn't yet resolved in his previous psychoanalytical work. According to Hal Foster, the uncanny was epitomised for Freud by 'two repressed states, castration and death', but 'for a long time he could not grasp the principle at work in these strange returns of the repressed, the dynamic of these repetitions' (1993, p.9). The answers were to be found in the infant play of a game referred to as *fort/da*, and the trauma of soldiers returning from the Great War. In the first example, the child would repeatedly go through the experience of making something disappear and reappear, but Freud could not comprehend why they would derive pleasure from something so disquieting. The second involved veterans re-enacting their wartime experiences through recurring dreams and compulsively repeated actions. Freud's dark notion of the death drive draws upon his observations of these two cases.

The silences of the unspoken are everywhere in The Uncanny, but perhaps most conspicuous by its apparent absence is the death drive. It is the concept that most closely connects Freud to the work of Georges Bataille and the dissident Surrealists. Officially put to paper in the year following publication of 'The Uncanny', 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' incorporates Freud's first ruminations on the theme of an inherent 'pull' towards death and the unchanging state. The essay saw the light of day in 1920, although it was being drafted by Freud, as a recent edition confirms, in 'the same month he was completing his paper on The Uncanny' (Strachey 1991, p.272). Articulating what was almost unquestionably one of Freud's most sobering, and prolific, conceptions, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' theorised that there existed within the individual a 'compulsion' which hinted at 'possession by some "daemonic" power' (1991, p.308) which Freud took from observation to be something 'more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle ... it overrides' (1991, p.294). This inclination towards what Freud terms 'unpleasure' (1991, p.279) would

become formalised as ‘death instincts’ and later the death drive, coexisting alongside a ‘life’ instinct.

The exact shape and composition of the drives would shift and change over the remainder of Freud’s career, related theories about sexuality and eroticism evolving into something recognisably similar to the philosophies of Georges Bataille: sex is perceived by both as a constituent part of the desire for death. The unofficial ‘source’ for these ideas, however, makes no outward mention of them. The death drive is never outwardly referred to by name in ‘The Uncanny’, but it haunts the text throughout. Submerged beneath the legible surface of Freud’s discourse, it remains an unseen, unspoken, uneasy truth, and as such it merits consideration alongside the uncanny as part of the same metaphorical ‘hydra’, to use Nicholas Royle’s term, calling to us out of the darkness visible like a strange yet familiar primordial beast. As this thesis argues, it is these dual concepts, the uncanny and the death drive, that mark a significant point of confluence between the works of Freud and the stop motion animators whose films are considered here. Similar affiliations are apparent in work by Milton, Poe and other writers, and especially in the dissident Surrealist traditions, which are expressed most vociferously through the writing of Georges Bataille.

Where Bataille and Freud can be said to diverge somewhat is in their differing degrees of what might be termed ‘comfort’ with these ideas. Freud would name them, and throughout his life would grapple to elucidate their crucial importance, but whilst he was strangely fascinated by their continued presence in his work evidence indicates that he felt greatly unsettled by them, too. There is, for instance, a perceptible hesitation in his willingness to discuss the death drive in ‘The Ego & the Id’ and he is keen to stress that the ‘theoretical considerations’ behind it are ‘supported by biology’ (1991, p.380). Later, in ‘Civilisation & Its Discontents’, originally published in 1930, Freud reluctantly appears to come to terms with ‘the assumption of the existence of an instinct of death’ when he writes ‘to begin with it

was only tentatively that I put forward the views I have developed here, but in the course of time they have gained such a hold upon me that I can no longer think in any other way' (1987, p.311). Bataille, by contrast, rarely if ever appeared to express hesitation when staking out his territory. The direct assault he made on enlightenment, and what was perceived as elevated thought, would be galvanised by precepts like the death drive in all but name. The articulation of a tangible darkness in humanity, and determination to seek out what is concealed beneath the base of the social pyramid, in the roots of the soil on which it stands, can be seen to coalesce at times with the complexities at the heart of the uncanny. In order to explore this further, however, Bataille's work should be understood in the context of the Surrealist movement from which it evolved.

## **Surrealism & Bataille**

Parallel to the period in which Freud was developing the concepts of 'The Uncanny' and its silent partner, the death drive, Surrealism as a movement was evolving from the collective traumas of the First World War, physical, psychological and spiritual. As a medical student in France, Surrealism's founder, André Breton, observed and participated in the various treatments and therapies administered to soldiers, irreparably damaged in every way possible by their experiences on the battlefield, and as Hal Foster writes in *Compulsive Beauty* it was under these circumstances 'that Breton first intuited the existence of a psychic (sur)reality on the basis of the *délires aigus* of the soldiers under care' (1993, p.1). Similarly to Freud, he perceived the potential release of something repressed in their 'symptoms of shock, of traumatic neurosis, of scenes of death compulsively restaged' (1993, p.1). In the damage resulting from the experiences of the war veterans, Breton saw aspects of the inner self exposed. The gaps, cracks and enduring scars that remained as open wounds afforded access

to unmediated expression of the psyche, and offered alternative ways of perceiving the world and the individual's place within it. Surrealism grew from this notion of opening up the hidden, internal self and unlocking its potential for radical change.

The Surrealist movement became more formalised following the publication of Breton's first manifesto in 1924. In political terms, it can be read as a response to the limitations and corruption of reason and rationality, which had brought Europe to its knees in the First World War, and which lingered in its aftermath. The document speaks of an unwavering commitment to exploring the unassailed depths of the human psyche, rooting around in untapped areas for concealed aspects of the self that could once more be brought to the surface. At one point Breton describes such a process occurring during and after dreams. 'What I most enjoy contemplating about a dream', he writes, 'is everything that sinks back below the surface in a waking state, everything I have forgotten about my activities in the course of the preceding day, dark foliage, stupid branches' (1977, p.11). In the second version of the manifesto he elaborates further, defining the Surrealist aim as:

the total recovery of our psychic forces by a means which is nothing other than the dizzying descent into ourselves, the systematic illumination of hidden places and the progressive darkening of other places, the perpetual excursion into the midst of forbidden territory (1977, pp.136 & 137).

In both passages it is possible to see coalescences with the Freudian concept of 'The Uncanny', the way in which Surrealism would aim to access the same 'dark foliage' and 'forbidden territory' from which the uncanny emerges. For Surrealists, the intention was to bring about a dramatic transformation in the way people thought and how they behaved, as the name of the movement's publication, *La Révolution surréaliste*, would suggest, when it appeared in 1924.

The Surrealist vision for a perceptual revolution gained momentum, and Surrealism flourished and spread as a philosophical, artistic and political movement in the 1920s and 1930s. Its influence and reach extended globally, various forms of Surrealism penetrating into

cultures as far removed from France as South America and Japan. Graeme Harper and Rob Stone have noted that ‘the movement itself had lost its strength and the term “Surrealism” was increasingly diluted” following World War II (2007, p.4). They add, however, that ‘Surrealism flourishes under pressure, relishing the challenge and thriving on the destruction of its target’ (2007, p.5). The fact that many of the stop motion animators whose work is featured in this thesis are widely considered to be surreal artists, or consider themselves to be Surrealists, is testament to the way it has continued to survive in one incarnation or another.

Nonetheless, it has been observed that some manifestations of Surrealism have succeeded in penetrating the darkness in the human psyche more effectively than others. Several commentators – Michael Richardson and Barbara Creed among them – have, for instance, observed a reluctance on the part of Breton to engage fully with the dark on its own terms, to confront in situ that aspect of the individual that, in the words of Edgar Allan Poe ‘busies itself among forbidden things’ (2008, p.257). Michael Richardson, for one, has drawn attention to how Breton expresses himself generally: ‘Breton’s writing is crystalline and lyrical’, he notes ‘reflecting the light and transparency with whose hope he would like to imbue the world’ (1994, p.5). The Bretonian approach could be termed one of transformation, not so much the professed desire to wallow in the dark that his dream analogies would suggest, as a technique he himself describes as ‘systematic illumination’, bringing these formally secluded places in the light of understanding by raising them into the realms of consciousness. ‘Viewed from the eyes of Breton’, writes Barbara Creed ‘Surrealism has been defined as an artistic practice whose central aim was an encounter with the marvellous which Breton, in the “First Surrealist Manifesto”, defined as an encounter with the beautiful’ (Harper & Stone 2007, p.116). What his perspective ultimately lacks – for the purposes of this research, at least – is a willingness to look directly and consistently into the ‘darkness visible’ and engage with it on its own ground.

By way of contrast, Georges Bataille would seem to embody more than any other literary figure the spirit of the Surrealist shadow-land, a writer unstinting in his determination to take the blackest elements and, by his own words, ‘face them squarely’ (2006, p.7). The extensive body of work produced by Bataille over more than forty years is, at the risk of understating, indicative of a surreal thinker who has chosen the least elevated path. It often echoes the timbre of Milton’s bleakest prose, and the uncanny experience of his main protagonist. Satan brings no light to the ‘doleful shades’ of his exile (2008, p.5) but is instead enveloped in its palpable darkness; similarly, Bataille maintains the integrity of the dark through immersion in its essence. Creed has written of Breton and Bataille’s ‘competing visions’ for Surrealism and the direction it should follow (Harper & Stone 2007, p.116), and Michael Richardson starkly compares Breton’s ‘crystalline’ lyricism to Bataille when he defines the penmanship of the latter as ‘marked by a dark humour in which any notion of hope is absent. The light which remains focused here is not transparent but dark and haunting, and emanates from a black sun’ (1994, pp.5 & 6).

Their differences are perhaps not as stark as some literary exchanges between them would suggest: insults were flung at each other in a number of articles, such as ‘The “Old Mole” and the Prefix Sur...’ (1929), ‘Rotten Sun’ (1930), ‘The Castrated Lion’ (1930) and ‘The Absence of Myth’ (published in 1947), as well as in Breton’s second manifesto. Ultimately, however, the two were able to find common ground, working together on occasion, and, as Michael Richardson points out, ‘their violent altercation behind them, both men seem to have been eager to assert their respect for each other’ (1994, p.8). But whilst the two are not so diametrically opposed in actuality as their spats would suggest, there remains a marked distinction between the slightly softer tread of Breton’s prose versus the determinedly brutal stomp of Bataille. A comparison of passages from their respective works should serve as

sufficient illustration. First, there is this piece of colourful prose from ‘Soluble Fish’, written by Breton in 1924:

There is an underwater smoking room, constructed in a particularly clever way, which is bounded in the water by a shadow theatre that we have found a way to project without any apparent screen, the shadow of hands picking hideous flowers and getting pricked, the shadow of charming and fearful beasts, the shadow of ideas too, not to mention the shadow of the marvellous that no one has ever seen (1977, p.63).

Despite the suggestions of darkness and reiteration of ‘the shadow’, Breton is still unabashedly romantic, his imagery that of a mildly disquieting dream or fairy tale. A sense of magic is conveyed by the screenless projections and ‘the shadow of the marvellous’.

What the words of Bataille express, by contrast, are a confrontational instinct and a willingness to take on the most unsavoury of subjects without flinching, inclinations Sigmund Freud would term embracing ‘unpleasure’ (1991, p.279). Associations with death – key to Freud’s investigation of the uncanny – are also at the core of much of Bataille’s writing, and in works such as *Eroticism* (1957) or *Story of the Eye* (1928), death and the sexual act become inextricably bound together. As Susan Sontag notes in her essay ‘The Pornographic Imagination’, Bataille has a clearer understanding of the connections between the two ‘than any other writer I know of’, conveying how ‘it’s toward the gratifications of death’ that ‘every truly obscene quest tends’ (2009, p.60). Her comments suggest that Bataille is mining the same dark territory as that which underpins Freud’s essay on ‘The Uncanny’. Remarking on Sontag’s essay for her book *Pornography and Seriality: The Culture of Producing Pleasure* Sarah Schascheck seems to support this notion when she notes how Sontag ‘seems at least partly to reiterate Freud’s theory of the death instinct’ (2014, p.122).

Sex and death in Bataille are perceived as bedfellows, conjoined in the role of reorienting human existence towards something more brutally truthful. In our untempered, primal selves, Bataille argues, these two are inexorably linked, *le mort* and *le petit mort*. ‘There does remain’, Bataille writes in the introduction to *Eroticism*, ‘a connection between death and



sexual excitement. The sight or thought of murder can give rise to a desire for sexual enjoyment' (2006, p.11). Similarly, a moment of contemplation between lovers in *Story of the Eye* succinctly expresses the ways in which Bataille perceives the equation between sex and death:

Her head was almost totally ripped off by the wheels. For a long time, we were parked a few yards beyond without getting out, fully absorbed in the sight of the corpse. The horror and despair at so much flesh, nauseating in part, and in part very beautiful, was fairly equivalent to our usual impression upon seeing one another (2001, p.11).

Bataille's sense of the 'beautiful' here is intrinsically linked to the tangible through the flesh of the corpse, and it contrasts sharply with the 'beautiful' and 'marvellous' descriptions of Breton, synonymous with the dream state. This is not to say, though, that Bataille was averse to the appropriation of dream-associative imagery in his work; indeed, *Story of the Eye* abounds with intimations of altered consciousness and oneiric suggestion – gothic castles swathed in moonlight, somnambulism and the dubious pleasures of the Spanish sun, 'hot, turbid, at times even unreal when the combined intensities of light and heat suggest the freedom of the senses' (2001, p.50). Nevertheless, at its core Bataille's writing retains its grip on the physical form, the substantive and remains bound to the flesh; this tempers any excessive flights of fancy and grounds his writing in the realm of the body, focused squarely on the fears, vulnerabilities and hidden fantasies which occupy the darkness visible within the human form. In this respect, Bataille very much echoes the central themes of the uncanny, which pertain directly to the physical form, as well as the sense in which stop motion, as Barry Purves writes, is very much concerned with 'physicality', with the physical nature of the animated subject (2010, p.8). This notion will be discussed further in Chapter 1.

Bataille's conceptions of human sexuality and death as inseparable, Eros and Thanatos inexorably joined, are umbilically tied to Freud's concept of The Uncanny through the elisions of the death drive and the ways in which Freud would later make his own links

between sexuality and death: they feed from the same primal and pre-civilised sources.

Bataille reiterates throughout his work that sex and eroticism should be contemplated in the same breath as death and dying by virtue of their connectedness in ancient human history, a kinship to which we remain firmly tethered. It is a view that draws upon his well-documented enthusiasm for certain primitive cultures and religious practices, such as Gnosticism. Gnostic belief in the reduction of life to a baseness incorporated elements of the licentious and of ‘certain sexual rites’ according to Bataille (2008, p.48) as well as ‘the conception of matter as an active principle having its own eternal autonomous existence as darkness’ – not just ‘the absence of light’ (Bataille 2008, p.47). It is here in this world of sex and death bleeding together, of primal fears and urges becoming physically manifest, and of darkness with an identity of its own, that Bataille’s work seems most analogous with that of Freud in ‘The Uncanny’. All these themes are central to the source of uncanny expression: the twin drives, and a repressed history. They’re also echoed in the new yet very old universe of the ‘darkness visible’, where Satan finds himself in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

What Bataille sought through the revival of primitive concepts, such as the notion of baseness and a base materialism, was a conduit directly into the irreducible blackness of humanity at its most unmoderated. All man’s most violent and instinctual impulses could be tapped into, without the obfuscation of the ‘civilised’ self. The upper echelons of art and culture would be reduced to the bedrock level of all other matter, collapsing the social pyramid. The brutality and ugliness of life – the death and decay at its core – would become the source of true beauty and the focus of any artistic expression, hence the erotic violence in *Story of the Eye*. ‘Man goes constantly in fear of himself’, wrote Bataille in 1957, ‘his erotic urges terrify him’ (2006, p.7). It is the determination to confront such fears that drives Bataille to actively overturn superficial notions of human identity and reveal something hidden, the persistent presence of the primitive and base concealed in darkness beneath the

rational veneer. In essence, it is akin to that liminal space from where we may unexpectedly sense an eruption of the uncanny, the return of the repressed aspects of ourselves from the darkest corners of the psyche.

## About the Chapters

The nature of the relationship between the uncanny, stop motion animation and the Batailleian Surreal is discussed at greater length in Chapter 1. More detail is provided on Freud's taxonomy of the various forms taken by the uncanny, as well as the importance of the relationship between cinema, concepts of uncanniness and the base material, in the context of the dark territory they navigate. A summary of stop motion history in Chapter 1 provides a contextualised view of how its form and content articulates the key concepts, illustrated by the work of highly regarded directors from the field.

Further chapters provide more extensive case studies of contemporary stop motion animators, specifically Shinya Tsukamoto, Jan Švankmajer and the Quay Brothers. These directors were specifically chosen because of their consistent engagement with the darker registers of the medium. All three directing entities have produced stop motion work that makes little or no attempt to contain those elements which are most closely associated with the uncanny and associated manifestations of the drive towards death. It is significant that they are all still active in this surprisingly thriving field, which is indicative of stop motion's strangely enduring currency in the face of major encroachments from the 'enlightenment' of technological advances.

Entitled 'Eruption & Irruption – Stop Motion in the Films of Shinya Tsukamoto', Chapter 2 focuses largely on the disturbing narratives of Japanese director Tsukamoto's first two *Tetsuo* films, where the bodies of human beings are made the site for some unsettling stop motion

animation. The chapter distinguishes itself from existing scholarship on Tsukamoto by focusing specifically on how he uses stop motion to address the themes of the uncanny, its invocations of the primal and the darkness it makes visible. It looks at the complex meanings behind the reiterated image of the 'rhizome' in the *Tetsuo* films, a metallisation that takes root and spreads, inflicting dramatic changes on those so 'infected'. Tsukamoto's work is characterised by a distinctly embodied experience of the uncanny, focusing on the way that the body is made a site of ambiguity. Signs of disease and infection within the body – something not quite right – which manifest uncannily on the outside are examined, as well as animism and the threats to identity and the self that arise from the concept of the double, a 'harbinger of death' in Freud's reading of 'The Uncanny' (2003, p.142). The interplay between sex and death is crucial to Freud's notion of twin drives and this also forms a key part of Tsukamoto's narratives. The apocalyptic tone that Tsukamoto brings to the *Tetsuo* series is entirely in keeping with the idea of embracing the primal aspects of the self. Stop motion is the form through which Tsukamoto chooses to express these ideas in *Tetsuo* (1989) and *Tetsuo II: Bodyhammer* (1992), using pixilation, object animation and some elements of clay animation in conjunction with live actors.

Chapters 3 & 4, 'A House & Its (Mal)Contents' and 'Unquiet Biology', look more closely at how Czech animator Jan Švankmajer's films visualise an expressed desire to connect with his inner child, and this chimes with the theories of Bataille, present in articles such as 'The Cruel Practice of Art' (1949), as well as the notion of the repressed that is central to Freud's reading of 'The Uncanny'. His involvement in the Czech Surrealist movement has informed the way in which he approaches stop motion, but these chapters argue that the tone of his animation can be likened to the dissident Surrealism of Georges Bataille, and to its expressions of the primal and base, through which uncanniness is also articulated in Švankmajer's animated work.

‘A House & Its (Mal)Contents’ focuses on the ways in which Švankmajer uses object animation, and puppet and clay animation, to make the familiar setting of the home simultaneously unfamiliar, and therefore uncanny. Švankmajer will often use objects in mischievous, malevolent and somewhat cruel ways in his films and this chapter examines how their frequently sinister nature connects with uncanny notions associated with the collapse of borders between life and death, with the problematic nature of destruction and the concept of gallows humour. His 1980 adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ was made without actors, or even human-like figures, and the unsettling effect created by Švankmajer’s choice to focus on recreating the story through the animation of objects is explored here, in the specific context of his Czech background and the social history of the country.

‘Unquiet Biology’ concentrates on the stop motion depictions of bodies and body parts in Švankmajer’s films. It analyses how Švankmajer uncannily deconstructs, reconstructs and substitutes human and animal forms through clay, puppet and object animation, as well as pixilation techniques, in order to make manifest the notion, central to Surrealism, of liberation. Freedom has certain darker connotations, associated with the collapse of form, and these are interrogated here. Likenesses to living beings, such as dolls and mannequins, are discussed with reference to Mori’s concept of the ‘uncanny valley’, and there is an extensive segment devoted to the ways in which Jan Švankmajer interrogates the liberation of the eye. His stop motion manipulations of the organ invoke uncanny feelings associated with the eye’s vulnerability to harm, and infer that Švankmajer is trying to change how the eye perceives and is perceived, a concept that is echoed in the work of writers such as Georges Bataille.

The fifth chapter, ‘Solitude, Darkness & the Living Dead – Stop Motion in the Films of the Quay Brothers’ looks at the ways in which the films of the twins interpret uncanny ideas

through representations of hermetically sealed worlds and darkened spaces. Characters are often shown to be isolated within their surroundings and trapped in patterns of repetition, both characteristics associated with uncanniness. Isolated within their solitude, the figures animated by the Quay Brothers reside in a dark and frightening world, where life and death are indistinguishable from each other. Like Tsukamoto and Švankmajer, the Quays have been perceived by some academics as surreal filmmakers (Buchan, 2011; Verrone, 2011) but, in terms of this thesis, their work is read as surreal in the more visceral, Bataillean sense. Flesh, when it appears, is deconstructed and violated, and the animated mannequins and other objects that characterise their films often inhabit lived-in worlds marked by the presence of base substances, like blood, detritus, dust and dirt. Further, any sense of eroticism comes tinged with connotations of violence and death. This chapter looks more closely at how their work reflects many of the central concepts of the uncanny – specifically links to the animistic, to madness, and to death – and how that imagery overlaps with the notions of Bataille. It also highlights their predilection for problematising divisions between organic and inorganic, live subject and lifeless object, by use of puppets that resemble humans but who can be dismembered or disassembled in films such as *Street of Crocodiles* (1986) or *Maska* (2010). The chapter notes the influence of writers such as Bruno Schulz and Stanislaw Lem on their animation, and their depictions of the decaying human form.

A brief coda entitled ‘Straining to be Contained’ offers examples of where the darker registers of stop motion are largely sublimated but remain detectable in the work of mainstream stop motion animators, particularly Nick Park, Tim Burton and Henry Selick. It analyses the ways in which narrative strategies such as the use of humour and a knowingness about cinema reduce the uncanny effects in their animation without eliminating them. It is followed by the conclusion, ‘When Stop Meets Motion’, which offers some final thoughts on the research. The intention is that by the end of this thesis it will have demonstrated how stop

motion can more pointedly articulate than any other form of cinema the fears and anxieties about the darker aspects of the human psyche which are expressed by Freud in 'The Uncanny', through much of Bataille's body of Surrealist writing, and in the notion of darkness becoming visible that is perceptible in the work of the various writers and filmmakers featured here.

## **Chapter 1:**

### **Welcome to Darkness**

#### **Introduction**

The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins? (Poe 2008, p.334).

In this rhetorical question from ‘The Premature Burial’, Edgar Allan Poe captures the spirit of uncanniness that is such a prominent feature of his work, and which underpins the themes of this research. Describing how the narrator finds himself mistakenly interred, the result of a quirk in his biology that leaves him prone to appearing dead, Poe’s macabre story articulates the same sense of elision between states and innate fears of death and darkness that are at the core of Freud’s thoughts on ‘The Uncanny’. When asking how life and death might be extricated from each other, Poe’s narrator knows he cannot expect an answer: he resides in a blur between these apparent oppositions, reflecting the conditions under which the uncanny emerges. Poe’s words are left hanging in the air as an unsettling reminder to us of the darkness that is visible under certain conditions; they echo the relationship between the individual and the disturbing phenomenon of the uncanny by focusing on a blind spot in the human psyche, the shadows in which contemplation of mortality and the drive towards death reside.

Further, the story’s preoccupations with questions of animation, with the ways in which stillness and movement, life and death, merge into one in the narrator’s biology mirror the uncanniness that is a defining characteristic of stop motion animation. It is of no small significance that the work of Poe has often been adapted into stop motion form: there are a number of examples in this thesis, including several films directed by Jan Švankmajer (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, 1980; *The Pit, the Pendulum and Hope*, 1984; *Lunacy*, 2005).



The overarching theme of ‘The Premature Burial’ captures the bleeding between apparent opposites, and the liminality that accompanies such uncanny manifestations. His rhetorical question puts in deceptively simple terms the complex interplay between the drives which, Freud argues, thrust human evolution forward whilst pulling them back, the life drive resisting the pull towards death and darkness. It is here that the uncanny makes its presence felt, and from where the uncanny qualities of stop motion emanate.

This chapter of the thesis gives more clarity to how the uncanny, and stop motion animation, express these darker facets of the human psyche by first, explaining in greater detail the various forms assumed by the uncanny which are identified in Freud’s essay. Significantly, the categories include one concerning the uncanniness of ‘being buried alive’ (2003, p.150). The ways in which Freud articulates the concerns of the uncanny, in relation to the hidden drives that underpin it, are fleshed out here, through an exploration of his taxonomy. Attention then turns to the role that cinema, and the ‘poor cousin’ that is animation, have to play in foregrounding uncanniness, with reference to Surrealism and the work of Georges Bataille. The chapter concludes with a closer look at the history of stop motion, and how it can be seen as consistently engaging – on a formal level – with the same dark themes and concepts referenced by Freud. This will inform the reader’s understanding of the more contemporary examples of uncanniness in stop motion which follow in subsequent chapters.

## **A Taxonomy of the Uncanny**

As the introduction to this research establishes, there is a sense in which Freud struggles to bring his taxonomising approach to bear on the subject of the uncanny. Consequently, his efforts to group the ‘persons and things, the impressions, processes and situations that can

arouse an especially strong and distinct sense of the uncanny in us' repeatedly undergo revision and rethinking (2003, p.134). Additional comments and asides suggest that there is more to be said about the forms the uncanny might assume, that there are more instances of uncanniness which haven't been discussed. Freud implies as much himself when, at the end of part II, he attempts 'to conclude this collection of examples, which is certainly not exhaustive' (2003, p.151). The manifestations he identifies, however, provide a broad enough selection, and are often sufficiently ambiguous, that they offer numerous possibilities for further study. This may explain, at least in part, the growing interest in Freud's interpretation of uncanniness among academics and theorists through the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries: as Anneleen Masschelein notes in her recent book *The Unconcept*, Freud's essay 'remains the primary focus of attraction in the continuing fascination with the uncanny in culture and theory alike' (2011, p.3).

The following passages identify nine fairly distinct categories of Freudian uncanniness in his study, but it should be noted that there are points where one or more overlap, or appear to converge. Freud seems to accept that this is an inevitable effect of taxonomising the uncanny, when he writes that 'our preference for tidy solutions and lucid presentation' does not prevent us 'from acknowledging that in real life it is sometimes impossible to distinguish' (2003, p.155). The uncanny is characterised in part by this 'blurring of the boundaries' and merging of definable features (2003, p.155).

Illustrative of the process are the uncanny forms first referred to by Freud in the context of Ernst Jentsch at the beginning of part II, and then revisited later several times. Initially Freud seems uncertain of whether they merit consideration as examples of uncanniness, and there is some vacillation over their status, but eventually he is able to say that they do possess a 'sense of the uncanny' (2003, p.141). They can be collectively described as questioning sentient status, uncertainty aroused 'as to whether something is animate or inanimate' and

‘whether the lifeless bears an excessive likeness to the living’ (2003, p.141). Two other subtypes can be folded into this category, ‘the uncanny effect of epilepsy or madness’, related to ‘manifestations of sickness’ (2003, p.150) and notions of ‘automatic – mechanical processes that may lie hidden behind the familiar image of a living person’ (2003, p.135). In all four cases, there is a discernible elision between a living, breathing individual in control of their own sentience, and an entity who signals, perhaps subtly, that they are not functioning in the conventional manner of a healthy, conscious being.

Freud lists ‘waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata’ (2003, p.135) as being among those who convey an impression of the uncanny through their ability to simulate the appearance of something living, and at times they can take on other sentient characteristics, movements or actions that imitate those of living entities. It is the proximity of such entities to sentience that engenders the uncanny. The opposite is also the case, however: there are those moments when something or someone ostensibly alive begins to assume the look and mannerisms of the lifeless. They approximate the motions of machines, or wound up toys. They may be stuck in one position, or repeating the same actions over and over, as is often the impression given by the epileptic fit. A similar effect is created in manifestations of insanity, when an individual recites the same words over and over, or there is compulsive repetition of movement. It might also be that they appear suddenly devoid of expression and emotion, drained of what might be termed their ‘human-ness’.

In many such instances, there is an accompanying feeling of uncanniness arising from the way the living start to resemble the dead, or vice versa. In an article included in Bruce Glenville’s book *The Uncanny: Experiments in Cyborg Culture*, Bruno Bettelheim describes the case history of a boy suffering from schizophrenia ‘who converted himself into a “machine” because he dared not be human’ (2002, p.117). In one chilling passage he states:

A human body that functions as if it were a machine and a machine that duplicates human functions are equally fascinating and frightening. Perhaps

they are so uncanny because they remind us that the human body can operate without a human spirit, that body can exist without soul (2002, p.117).

Concerns about the psychology of the individual, and about dehumanisation, have been particularly prevalent in philosophical debate since the time of the Industrial Revolution, and over the past hundred years since Freud's essay appeared the uncanny has often been utilised as a tool in negotiating such fears. As Anneleen Masschelein describes it for *The Unconcept*, the uncanny addresses the human experience, 'tinged by a deep-rooted sense of estrangement, unrest and (paranoid) anxiety, and by the acute awareness of the challenges posed by a rapidly evolving, globalised, increasingly virtual late-capitalist society' (2011, p.5). Stop motion animators, such as Shinya Tsukamoto, Jan Švankmajer and The Quay Brothers, address these concerns through stop motion and in the specific contexts of their creation, which will be analysed in chapters 2 to 5 of this thesis, respectively.

Freud theorises that the uncanniness engendered by epilepsy or madness may originate in 'the layman' seeing a 'manifestation of forces that he did not suspect in a fellow human being, but whose stirrings he can dimly perceive in remote corners of his own personality' (2003, p.150). He links the fear to other 'manifestations of sickness' and to an ancient belief in 'the influence of demons', and the control of the body by 'secret forces' (2003, p.150). It is a notion that connects such manifestations to a group Freud identifies by the phrase 'the omnipotence of thoughts' (2003, p.147), which form a second category of the uncanny. He associates them with a phase in our individual development correspondent to that of 'primitive peoples' (2003, p.147) and a 'view characterised by the idea that the world was people with human spirits, (...) by the omnipotence of thoughts and the technique of magic that relied on it' and by 'the attribution of carefully graded magical powers to alien persons and things' (2003, p.147). It is a type of uncanniness that is related to the fear of the curse, and the notion of fate, but more pertinent to this research are the questions it raises

concerning possession and the appearance of life in objects through what is referred to as ‘animism’, the belief that all things are sentient. Clearly, there is a correlation in the animistic with aspects of the first category of the uncanny identified here, which is not unexpected: there are many convergences and crossovers between the various uncanny forms, as Freud indicates. The distinction is perhaps the same as that which can be made between kinds of stop motion. Category one, like clay and puppet animation, is aligned with simulations and resemblances to living forms, humans and animals. By contrast, category two more closely approximates object animation. Animism relates to inanimate objects, for instance stones or cutlery, which are both animated in the stop motion films of directors such as Jan Švankmajer. It shares a form of primitivism with concepts of the ‘evil eye’, the devil, and the possession by malevolent forces, a stage in human development which Freud suggests has left ‘behind in us residual traces that can still make themselves felt’ and which therefore invoke a sense of the uncanny (2003, p.147).

A recognisably similar echo of the primitive is apparent in the figure of the double, or the doppelgänger, a third category of the uncanny. This doubling can take many forms, not just identical appearance but also what Freud calls ‘the transmission of mental processes from one of these persons to another’ (2003, p.141), and the owning of knowledge or experience. It is often connected with the loss of identity, the loss of self, the substitution of one’s identity for another, and various forms of duplication, division and interchange. Actions and events may be mirrored, along with ‘the same facial features, the same characters, the same destinies, the same misdeeds, even the same names, through successive generations’ (2003, p.142). Freud has also discussed the uncanny effect of seeing one’s own image and mistaking it for another person, as in the story of the train carriage which is recounted in the Introduction of this thesis.

On that occasion the effect engendering the uncanny was created by a mirror, and the double is similarly associated with shadows, and the notion of a soul being appropriated. Freud also makes reference to ‘all the possibilities which, had they been realised, might have shaped our destiny’ (2003, p.142) and this brings to mind the idea of alternative lives and parallel universes, in which similar versions of ourselves might have taken different courses, made different choices, and created different outcomes. There is something quite ghostly about the idea, that we are haunted by the decisions we never made. Doubles here become multiples, an army of other incarnations that are alive and yet not. At the heart of all those troubling instances of doubling is a fear of loss, of being subsumed, and of death. It is a form of darkness that has been explored a great deal in literature, in horror films, and in stop motion. Tsukamoto, for instance, confronts the subject directly in his *Tetsuo* films, and offers a radical solution relating to the notion of conjoinment, which is discussed in Chapter 2.

Repetition has already been discussed in several examples but it is significant enough in Freud’s essay to merit a category of its own. He refers to ‘reference of the same thing’ (2003, p.143) and to feelings of ‘helplessness’ that can be created by the experience of ‘unintentional return’ (2003, p.144). He could, of course, be talking about the fundamental nature of the uncanny itself, associated with the return of the repressed. Freud offers specific examples of repetitive occurrences in terms of place, coming back to the same street and spot time and again, or ‘repeatedly colliding with the same piece of furniture’ in the dark (2003, p.144). He makes connections to recurring images, numbers that come back over and over in different guises, a phenomenon related to ideas of fate and chance.

The compulsion to repeat that Freud identifies is crucial in linking the uncanny to the concept of the drives that lie hidden at the core of the uncanny. It is the only point in the essay where Freud makes explicit reference to them, commenting that ‘this compulsion probably depends on the essential nature of the drives themselves. It is strong enough to

override the pleasure principle and lend a demonic character to certain aspects of mental life' (2003, p.144). This forms the basis for his elaborations on the death drive that follow, in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' and after. Interestingly, he links the compulsion to repeat with an image of the erotic: the place to which he is continually drawn back is plainly associated with prostitution. 'I found myself in a district about whose character I could not long remain in doubt', he coyly states. 'However, after wandering about for some time without asking the way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street' (2003, p.144). In this passage on repetition, more than anywhere else in his essay, Freud infers connections between eroticism, the death drive and the darkness visible in the uncanny. Georges Bataille negotiates similar dark coalescences between sex and death, often through expressions that emphasise a dangerous physicality. He describes his aim in this regard as 'to pierce the darkness' of the erotic; 'the domain of eroticism', he writes 'is the domain of violence' (2006, p.16).

A key part of Freud's discussion of what constitutes uncanniness is his re-reading of 'The Sandman', a short story by E.T.A. Hoffmann. The abridged Freudian interpretation focuses on specific moments from the tale which he deems relevant to his case, and he is influenced to refer to Hoffmann as a source by Ernst Jentsch, who had begun to formulate his own ideas regarding the uncanny using Hoffmann's work. 'The Sandman' focuses on a character called Nathaniel, who is haunted by the image of a man, or creature, who he glimpsed in his father's study as a child, and who, in the words of Freud, 'threatened to drop red-hot grains of coal in his eyes and then throw these into the brazier' (2003, p.137). Nathaniel equates the experience with a story told to him by his nursemaid, about the figure of the Sandman, who takes the eyes of the young 'as food for his children' (2003, p.136). The imagery associated with eyes that Hoffmann uses is discussed by Freud as uncanny both separately and in relation to the fear of being castrated. The essay needs to be read carefully on these points in

order to understand that Freud is not discounting the ‘fear of damaging or losing’ the eye as something uncanny in its own right (2003, p.139), but he strongly makes the case that ‘anxiety about one’s eyes (...) is quite often a substitute for the fear of castration’ (2003, p.139). He later adds that the idea of ‘losing other organs’ is ‘first’ informed by this notion (2003, p.140), which, again, is not to deny that fears of losing essential elements of the human body, of losing its integrity, have their own uncanny resonance.

Ocular concerns are particularly prevalent in Freud’s reading of ‘The Uncanny’, as so many examples he puts forward depend on visual referents, and any links between the uncanny and the medium of stop motion are clearly bound up with ideas of visual perception, or indeed mis-perception. The eye and its ability to discern, to truly see, are a crucible for the various concerns of the uncanny, particularly those concerning elision and the blurring of boundaries, and stop motion embodies those same concerns. It is unsurprising, then, that both Freud and the stop motion animators who have engaged with some of those dark themes which engender an uncanny effect have made anxieties concerning the eye a prominent feature in their work. In the chapters that follow, fears associated with the eye are addressed a number of times, most notably in a section of Chapter 4, on the work of Jan Švankmajer in reference to problematic notions of liberation.

The loss of organs, including the sexual organ, can be understood as related to images of dismemberment and body parts capable of ‘independent activity’ that Freud identifies in his essay. ‘Severed limbs, a severed head, a hand detached from the arm, feet that dance by themselves – all of these have something highly uncanny about them’, he writes (2003, p.150). There are many such images in stop motion films, from Georges Méliès onwards, and again they question the idea of sentience, and divisions between the living and the dead. Like eyes, Jan Švankmajer interrogates the idea of undoing the integrity of the body and freeing the human figure in his animation. The Quay Brothers also utilise images of broken and



dismembered bodies in several of their films, as a way of deconstructing and revealing the base and primal aspects of the human psyche.

The last three categories are more overtly characterised by the anxieties they express about mortality and the fear of what it connotes. 'Being buried alive, only apparently dead' is described as a 'terrifying fantasy' by Freud, and one that he connects to 'the fantasy of living in the womb' (2003, p.150). He supplements these comments with a passage on how 'neurotic men state that to them there is something uncanny about the female genitals. But what they find uncanny', he writes 'is actually the entrance to man's old "home", the place where everyone once lived' (2003, p.151). He goes on to describe how the mother's genitals and the womb can often be the source of feelings of recognition and déjà vu (2003, p.151). From an uncanny perspective, the womb can be taken to represent the source of life, but it can also symbolise the loss of individuality and of identity. To be subsumed once more into the womb is to become once more dependent and helpless – safe and secure, perhaps, but also lost to darkness and death that, as Georges Bataille notes, accompanies 'the denial of our individual lives' (2006, p.24). For Freud, there is a dangerous combination of fear and desire which centres on the death of the self and the reabsorption into the womb, and which commingles with the fear of being buried alive.

In her book, *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror and the Primal Uncanny* Barbara Creed explains how the uncanny concept of the familiar made unfamiliar, focused on the womb, is relatable to the ghost, and the image of the haunted house, which form part of the eighth category of the uncanny presented here. 'The ghost transforms the home – what Freud describes as our first home or the womb – into an uncanny place in which everything that was once familiar is rendered strange, eerie and terrifying' (2003, p.18). The imagery of birth and death that Creed associates with the reproductive systems of the female body echoes Freud's gender specificity, and, like Freud, she identifies the womb as directly related to images of home and

homeliness made unhomely. It is a notion that Shinya Tsukamoto, among other animators, has expressed visually through stop motion in his work on the *Tetsuo* films, where clay and object animations are used to represent discomfiting elisions between birth and death.

According to Freud, he has resisted prioritising ‘anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts’ in his analysis of the uncanny (2003, p.148), alongside the image of ‘*ein unheimliches Haus* (“an uncanny house”)', which ‘can be rendered only by the periphrasis “a haunted house”’ (2003, p.148). This is despite the subject being ‘to many people the acme of the uncanny’ (2003, p.148). He reasons that, although it is ‘perhaps the most potent’ example of uncanniness it ‘is too much mixed up with the gruesome and partly overlaid by it’ (2003, p.148). It is a strange argument when considered in the context of the other uncanny manifestations discussed by Freud, many of which have what might be termed ‘gruesome’ associations, particularly those related to eyes and damage to other body parts. It clearly unnerves Freud to talk so directly about death, an idea supported by Todd Dufresne in his book *Tales from the Freudian Crypt: The Death Drive in Text and Context*, where he states ‘it is well known that Freud suffered from what he himself called *Todesangst*, an anxiety about death and dying, that went beyond the anxieties we might chalk up to hard times’ (2000, p.39). He later adds ‘many have reasoned that Freud’s dealings with death border on the obsessive’ (2000, p.40). It is clear from his essay on ‘The Uncanny’ that Freud sees the subject of death, and its various accoutrements, as playing a highly significant role in occurrences of the phenomenon. ‘In hardly any sphere’, he writes, ‘has our thinking and feeling changed so little since primitive times or the old been so well preserved, under a thin veneer, as in our relation to death’ (2003, p.148). Freud sees the fear it engenders as emanating from two sources, an undiminished strength of emotion regarding the subject, and uncertainty regarding the process. Repression of our feelings in relation to death, and doubt as to what happens when someone dies, have resulted in a decidedly uncanny feeling

experienced whenever the subject arises, and particularly where that coincides with a collapsing of borders between the living and the dead, the animate and inanimate. It is a key feature of the relationship between the uncanny and stop motion animation, as this thesis will establish.

The ninth and final category of the uncanny referred to by Freud does not form part of any list in the essay, but is explicitly identified twice in part III. ‘Moreover’, Freud asks, ‘where does the uncanny effect of silence, solitude and darkness come from?’ (2003, p.153). It is a question he tries to answer at the conclusion when he comments ‘all we can say is that these are factors connected with infantile anxiety, something that most of us never wholly overcome’ (2003, p.159). Their combined presence is perceptible in other excerpts from Freud’s work, such as the case history of ‘Fräulein Elisabeth von R’, included in *Studies in Hysteria* from 1895. One moment of recollection from his patient concerns the death of her sister, which is contextualised by flashes of images from her memory, remembering:

the short journey from Vienna to the summer resort in its neighbourhood where her sister lived, their reaching there in the evening, the hurried walk through the garden to the door of the small garden house, the silence within and the oppressive darkness; how her brother-in-law was not there to receive them, and how they stood before the bed and looked at her sister as she lay there dead (2004, p.156).

Silence and darkness are fused together in this instance with the solitude of individual memory as features associated with death, and the uncanny vision of seeing someone so familiar in an unfamiliar state.

Darkness can be, as Freud describes it, ‘oppressive’ and isolating, an impression that Milton echoes in his reflections on Satan, at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*. Whilst it is symbolic of the obscurity in which the source of the uncanny, and of repression, is located, however, it is also characterised by notions of liberation and release, as Milton, Bataille and other writers such as Poe and Stanislaw Lem have suggested. Seemingly opposed, these two aspects of darkness are in fact closely intertwined. Images of death, which connote

associations with the buried, the repressed and with darkness, can also be understood as expressive of release, and freedom from the corporeal state. It is at this point of collapsing borders, including the most profound border of all, the one that separates life from death, that the uncanny is most strongly felt. As this thesis will demonstrate in what follows cinema, too, can be seen as having an intimate relationship with darkness, death and the uncanny.

## **The Shadows of Film**

‘Film’, writes Nicholas Royle ‘haunts Freud’s work. It is there in the essay on the uncanny, for example, flickering allusively, elusively, illusively at the edge of the textual screen’ (2004, p.76), in images that emanate from darkness. In both literal and figurative terms, darkness has helped to shape film history. Made possible by the technical capability to project moving images onto a screen of one kind or another, film has necessarily been consigned to the dark or darkened spaces for its exhibition, although recent technological advances have made this much less of a prerequisite. In such consignment, some theorists and cinephiles have written of how their own psyches are reflected back at them; like the conditions of sleep, the surroundings serve to bring their inner selves to the surface, hidden fears and desires emerging out of the dark. In his essay ‘Leaving the Movie Theater’, for instance, Roland Barthes describes ‘the “darkness” of the cinema’ as ‘the very substance of reverie’, marked by ‘its absence of worldliness’ and ‘by the relaxation of postures’ (1992, p.346). ‘How many members of the cinema audience’ Barthes asks rhetorically, ‘slide down in their seats as if into a bed’? (1992, p.346).

The proximity of the sleeping state to notions of death, the associations of both with the experience of watching a film, and the curious ‘half-life’ of figures on screen, have been observed and written about since cinema’s earliest beginnings. Tom Gunning, for instance,

has described how audiences sensed an uncanny blurring of the distinctions between life and death with cinema early on in its history. Interviewed for Adam Simon's documentary *The American Nightmare* (2000), Gunning articulates the sense in which those who flocked to picture houses in the medium's early days often sensed that they were being confronted by figures emanating from an undead limbo:

Cinema itself could become a haunted house. The images themselves have something of a quality not just of a representation but a zone between reality and representation, which is exactly what ghosts are: images of people long dead. When cinema was first invented people received it by saying this is immortality. Death will no longer be total, because we will have images of people – not just still photographs but of their movements, of a moment of their life. And so what first seemed to promise immortality ultimately delivers ghosts. What we get is not someone who lives forever but someone whose image has been caught and forced to repeat the same gestures over and over again, condemned to an eternal repetition (2000).

In his article 'The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde' Gunning also suggests that in many early films, particularly those made around 1906-1907, there is a tendency towards breaking the illusion of the fourth wall in cinema and addressing the audience directly. Film-makers would incorporate 'the recurring look at the camera' into their work, marking it out as a 'cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator' (1986, p.64). Such actions are distinctly uncanny: they lift the curtain and reveal the trick, blurring any distinctions between reality and fantasy. Interestingly, Gunning states that as viewers we have grown accustomed to the proliferation of film images and the tricks performed on us by cinema and its machinery; as a consequence – in his words – 'those original strange feelings, those uncanny feelings have been buried under generations of habit and familiarity' (2000).

Building on this argument, but developing it in a different context, Laura Mulvey suggests in *Death 24x a Second* that advancements in home viewing technologies and the innate ageing of the cinematic machine have combined to restore uncanniness to the film image. Mulvey describes how, in cinema 'a technological novelty gives rise to a technological

uncanny, in a collision between science and the supernatural' (2009, p.43) and, as she perceives it 'new technologies have contributed ... to bringing the uncanny back to the cinema. The ease with which the moving image can now be halted exposes the cinema's mechanisms and the illusion of its movement' (2009, p.52). In other words, the ability the viewer now has to control the flow of the film by pausing it, rewinding it and fast-forwarding it, even on some occasions changing their view of the sequence to a different angle, has allowed uncanniness to re-emerge in the film viewing experience. For Mulvey, these new technological conditions mean that we are able to experience cinema at its most uncanny again. The ease with which we can expose the workings of the film creates a blur once more between the animate and inanimate, reinserting the sense of a 'stop' into the illusion of motion, and it facilitates the ability to repeat incessantly the same sequences over and over again if we so wish. In other words, uncanniness has been restored. This in turn brings to the fore our deepest and most persistent fears and anxieties, ever present but typically confined to the darker enclaves of our minds, specifically those thoughts concerning death and the complexities of its interplay with life. Mulvey summarises it thus:

In the cinema organic movement is transformed into its inorganic replica, a series of static, inanimate images, which, once projected, then become animated to blur the distinctions between the oppositions. The homologies extend: on the one hand, the inanimate, inorganic, still, dead; on the other, organic, animate, moving, alive. It is here, with the blurring of these boundaries, that the uncanny nature of the cinematic image returns most forcefully and, with it, the conceptual space of uncertainty: that is, the difficulty of understanding time and the presence of death in life (2009, pp. 52 & 53).

Mulvey's comments, and those of Gunning, give some indication of the extraordinary relationship film images have had with the hidden and the uncanny throughout the medium's lifespan. Both recognise that the uncanny is a fundamental part of the cinematic experience, and suggest that this becomes especially prominent at moments of technological change. They both also argue that uncanniness is engendered when we as viewers are confronted by

its materiality, when its constructedness is revealed to us. The inference is that the illusion of 'life' in the cinema is profoundly connected with its ability to convey motion whilst at the same time concealing inertia, and that an uncanny effect is created when that illusion is uncovered, through the advancement of technology or the breaking of the fourth wall.

This thesis argues that, for the reasons Gunning and Mulvey suggest, stop motion bears a privileged relationship with the uncanny. More so than live action film, stop motion announces the mechanisms through which movement, and the semblance of life, is conjured from stillness, lifelessness and death. It is able to more visibly interrogate the way in which oppositions merge to engender uncanniness, and particularly those concerning animate and inanimate states, and their associations with life and death. Whilst all stop motion is uncanny, this thesis will also show how a dark tradition of stop motion identified here foregrounds the latent potential of stop motion animation to unsettle and to disturb by similar processes to those that Gunning and Mulvey suggest, through a release from the strategies of containment that might otherwise diminish its impact.

## **Surrealism, Film & Marginality**

Given their historical affinity with notions of the altered state, it is unsurprising that the Surrealists were so enamoured of film. It fed their desire for what Graeme Harper and Rob Stone call 'Plato's cave and Proust's madeleine' (2007, p.1), the search for 'what could broadly be called Truth' in the shadows cast by a cave fire, and in material objects that may trigger something obscure in the memory (2007, p.1). As Paul Hammond recounts in *The Shadow & Its Shadow* 'the movie auditorium was, the Surrealists held, the festive tent of that quest after our tenebrous, originary depths' (2000, p.4). Seeking to explore untapped areas of the human psyche, members of the Surrealist movement perceived that the cold exposure of

enlightenment threw everything around it into shadow – to which, Hammond writes, the Surrealists ‘took umbrage (a word deriving from *umbra*, shadow) (...) instead devoting themselves to the reenchantment of nature, and of man, through a mythopoeic, totalizing investigation of existence’s shadow side’ (2000, p.2). By probing darkness, the Surrealists would look for ways to reconnect with the romance they felt had been lost to Enlightenment, and the environs of the cinema provided the ideal conduit back to that lost world. ‘The Surrealist response to cinema’, observes Hammond ‘was passionate, poetic, Romantic’ (2000, p.1), the images projected through a darkened space ‘setting the revelations of night alongside those of day’ (2000, p.1). Dreams could potentially become reconciled with the waking world through cinema. Similarly, Michael Richardson writes of such a collocation occurring in his book *Surrealism and Cinema*, describing the conjunction between the two as:

a seductive one. It evokes an undefined relation, a meeting point between the opposites of light and dark, presence and absence, actuality and imagination which suggests the actualisation of the supreme point which André Breton identified as the aim of surrealism (2006, p.1).

Georges Bataille, however, clearly sees cinema as capable of liberating in a much more visceral sense, his comments on the film *Un Chien Andalou* (Buñuel & Dalí, 1929) reflective of the urge to engage with the primal within more directly, and thus invoke the spirit of the uncanny. He is most preoccupied with the opening scene, in which a woman appears to have her eye slit open with a razor, and this forms the centrepiece for a more general discussion of eyes in anthropological and literary contexts, with specific reference to the fear they may engender. When he returns to addressing the film directly, in footnotes, he declares it ‘extraordinary’ (2008, p.19), making an observation that, momentarily, seems synonymous with Bretonian Surrealism: ‘several very explicit facts appear in successive order’ he writes, ‘without logical connection it is true’ (2008, p.19). His description suggests a dreamlike condition, describing a disconnected, oneiric narrative that echoes the Bretonian use of automatism and free association. What particularly piques Bataille’s interest in this curious



structure, however, is not a Romantic sense of dream logic but that the depths of depravity and uncivilised behaviour it may sink to remain difficult to predict throughout. As he puts it, events are seen to penetrate ‘so far into horror that the spectators are caught up as directly as they are in adventure films. Caught up and even precisely caught by the throat, and without artifice; do these spectators know, in fact, where they – the authors of this film, or people like them – will stop?’ (2008, p.19). For Bataille, *Un Chien Andalou* represents baseness and the base material writ large, his vision for the dissident Surreal graphically depicted, and for him it is the only route to true freedom from the shackles of supposed ‘civilisation’. ‘How’, questions Bataille rhetorically ‘can one not see to what extent horror becomes fascinating, and how it alone is brutal enough to break everything that stifles?’ (2008, p.19). In other words, his resolution to the contemporary dilemmas of the human condition is absolute release without recourse to enchantment or some oneiric idyll. In essence, it is an untempered confrontation with the darkness visible.

An important aspect of Bataille’s relationship to Breton and other members of the Paris Surrealist movement is that he and his dissident colleagues – Roger Caillois, Robert Desnos, André Masson and Michel Leiris among them – were considered marginal, and to a certain extent they still are, in terms of Anglo-American studies in translation. They were a rebellious fringe element looked upon as separate to the ‘mainstream’, disassociated, as Michael Richardson notes in *The Absence of Myth* ‘from contamination with surrealism’ (1994, p.1), a separateness which could be said to work both ways. The impression of being considered peripheral can be equally applied to Freud’s body of work, since his essay on ‘The Uncanny’ is often read in the same light, a curious anomaly that ‘tempts him to stray from the straight and narrow path of psychology’, in the words of Hugh Haughton prefacing a Penguin edition of the essay (2003, p.vii). In the cases of both Freud’s ‘The Uncanny’ and Bataille’s group it could be argued that the relative detachments of each from the centre serve to

facilitate a sense of free thought, a deviation from the norm in operation. This affords both writers and their works the opportunity to instigate widespread changes in ways of thinking relatively unnoticed, from the gloomy recesses of obscure margins.

Peter Hames has argued from much the same perspective about animation, which has consistently found itself relegated to the fringes of cinema history, in favour of the various live action forms. In an early chapter of his book *Dark Alchemy: the Cinema of Jan Švankmajer*, Hames makes reference to the relative disregard conventional film circles have for animation. Since it ‘almost routinely examines areas of visual communication ignored by mainstream cinema’, he states ‘it is frequently taken for granted’ (2008, p.25). He proposes, though, that this process of ghettoisation may be to animators’ advantage as it facilitates the inclusion of ‘unusual and disturbing’ material within the body of their work (2008, p.25), the freedom to make the darkness visible within their films and with a lessened risk of censure. It is a perspective shared by Paul Wells: in *Understanding Animation*, he identifies its status as that of ‘a second cousin to mainstream cinema’ (1998, p.2), the poor relation who remains ‘consigned to innocent, inappropriate or accidental audiences’ (1998, p.6). Like Hames, Wells is keen to stress the advantages of this relegation. From their exteriorised position – outside looking in – animators are afforded the opportunity ‘to create films with surface pleasures and hidden depths’ (1998, p.6).

Wells goes on to discuss both the Surreal and the uncanny in regard to the forms these ‘hidden depths’ may assume, writing that ‘the notion of “the uncanny” is central to the whole art of animation as well as its more surreal manifestations’ (1998, p.48). It is interesting to note how Wells tethers the two movements together in the same sentence here, and by doing so implies that animation, when it is played out in ways indicative of the surreal, is an uncanny experience. He writes how:

...animation has the ready capacity to facilitate “the uncanny” by effacing the imagined and the real in creating an environment where inanimate lines,

objects and materials have the illusion of life, impossible relations can take place, and representational modes of expression become fully accepted aspects of the “real” world (1998, p.48).

While uncanniness may absolutely, he observes, be detectable in the ‘comic strangeness’ of some cartoons it is equally apparent in the ‘dread and fear’ (1998, p.49) that can be evoked by animation at its darkest, a phrase that recalls both the underlying causes for uncanny experiences and the words of Bataille regarding horror. Despite his apparent eagerness to embrace this aspect of animation, however, the potentialities of this avenue are not fully pursued.

The research undertaken here extends and elaborates on Wells’ arguments by asserting that stop motion animation, more than other animated form, is able to use its marginalised status to articulate the nature of the uncanny, as well as many of its key themes. For instance, the slightly odd imitation of life that is unique to increments of stop motion makes manifest the notion of ‘breaks’ becoming apparent in the ostensible sentience of beings, allowing a peek at something awry beneath the surface. As delineated in the categories of ‘The Uncanny’, explored earlier in this chapter, these ‘breaks’ may assume forms such as those that Freud refers to as ‘manifestations of insanity’ (2003, p.135) and ‘the uncanny effect of epilepsy or madness’ (2003, p.150). In other words, there are forces from within the body that take control and change or distort its natural rhythms, movements and features. Where once an individual appeared stable, rational and human, these afflictions, as Freud states ‘arouse in the onlooker vague notions of automatic – mechanical – processes that may lie hidden behind the familiar image of a living person’ (2003, p.135). Such statements are suggestive of the articulations of stop motion, the notion of a ghostly lifelessness detectable within the semblance of life.

Freud’s examination of these ideas centres on the figure of Olympia in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’. Nathaniel, the protagonist in the story, spies Olympia from a distance and is

entranced by her, forsaking his fiancée at the prospect of wooing this mysterious woman. It is only later that his love is crushed upon discovery that Olympia, in Freud's words, is nothing more than 'an automaton ... in which Coppola – the Sand-Man – has set the eyes' (2003, p.137). Olympia is made to appear human in a human environment, and the moment of shock that results from her status being revealed is made all the more uncanny as a result. Similarly, the calibrations of stop motion figures, when placed alongside live action equivalents, visually toy with our perceptions of what is actually sentient by mimicking the living. They 'seem' alive, but in the deliberateness of their movements they are eerily, unnaturally so: they are creatures of the liminal.

Animism, realisation of the primitive belief in what the OED defines as 'the attribution of a living soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena' (2004), is described by Freud as exhibiting a 'distinct sense of the uncanny' (2003, p.135) and here too there are recognisable correlations with stop motion. All things are imbued with kinetic and sentient attributes in the sensibilities of the animistic, and such ancient, half-remembered perceptions of the universe play into any doubts about how the world is perceived. Blessed with the gift of sight, and yet oftentimes blissfully unaware of its limitations, we look upon that which one moment appears to be still and lifeless and in the blink of an ancestral eye it is seemingly transformed into something startlingly vital. Stop motion, in its resemblance to animism, thereby comes to represent a disquieting throwback, vacillating between states like an ancient spectre rematerialising before us, apparently lifeless yet frighteningly alive in the same moment.

In his expansive history, *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation*, Giannalberto Bendazzi applies the adjective 'uncanny' to his description of the 'trick' that is stop motion (1994, p.8). The implication in this description is that the uncanny nature of the 'trick' retains its power to affect us because we remain connected, at least in part, to the same primal and

preadult selves that are made fearful by the animistic, or by deviations in natural biological motions and responses. It is this connection that Bataille strove to revive and make the absolute centre of his vision for Surrealism. 'Humanity' has retained its 'animality' (Stoekl 2008, p.xiii), according to Bataille, and it cannot be repressed. The hidden will always come out into the open. Stop motion makes visual this connectedness to the animal and the primal, through its trick, the elisions between the living and the dead.

### **'Stops' Through History**

Turning to specific stop motion animators and texts now, there is ample historical evidence to demonstrate that the medium has provided a locus for 'The Uncanny', for Bataille's 'black element' uncovered in a quest for the primitive (Richardson 1994, p.74) and for the 'doleful shades' that characterise Milton's darkness becoming visible, echoed in the work of writers such as Poe, Lovecraft, Lem and Schulz. Given this context, it comes as no great surprise that horror, science fiction and fantasy cinema have made most use of the stop motion process, and since the earliest flickerings of film history.

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, stop motion animation is thought to have first appeared in the films of Georges Méliès. In his magic box repertoire, stop motion is interposed to conceal cracks across the seams of what appears impossible. When the Selenite alien army needs dispatching in *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), for instance, their end is camouflaged by a puff of stop motion mesmerism, as the camera is momentarily stopped and then restarted, actors seemingly replaced with smoke. This is the essence of stop motion, at its most rudimentary. In a sense both distraction and attraction, the technique's effect upon the eye is hypnotic and yet illusory: we catch the start and see the finish but somehow 'blink out' the trick in the middle, even whilst intuiting its existence.

It is in moments like this that Méliès encapsulates what has remained an essential dichotomy in the stop motion effect – the persistent sense of presence and absence melded together. He blurs the distinction between that which we see and that which we don't quite catch, but instinctively know is present. For a societal structure so dependent on visual stimulus and learning by accumulated observation, there is a profound irony in the notion that so much of what determines who we are seems concealed from sight before us. It is a paradox that Freud recognises and attempts to define in the complexities of 'The Uncanny', and which Bataille determines is intrinsic to the base and primal creature to which we must ultimately revert. Both infer in their contrasting ways that there is something to be gained from learning to see differently, to look beyond the artifice. Stop motion, it would seem, is possessed of the innate ability to bring together that which is apparent and what is kept hidden, and encourage us to see more clearly, through its emphasis on the blur between the two.

Associations with death, and the latency of the death drive, whose dark shadows can be sensed in the stop motion film, are a strong feature in the work of Méliès. They are, of course, central to the way his films, and those of many other stop motion animators, negotiate ideas of presence and absence, the blur between the corporeal and the spectral. The 'now you see it, now you don't' visual trickery that Méliès uses over and over again in films such as *The Magician* (1898) and *The Four Troublesome Heads* (1898) has resonances with the *fort/da* game that is understood to have partly inspired Freud to formulate his theories regarding the death drive, and whose spirit is at the heart of the uncanny. Moreover, images specifically connected with death are often a feature of Méliès' work. Barry Purves has described, for instance, how in that first 'accident' that led to the development of stop motion as a technique 'the jump cut had seemingly transformed an omnibus into a hearse' (2010, p.14). In other words, the living are momentarily seen to blur with the dead. The theme resurfaces in films such as *The 400 Tricks of the Devil* (1906), where a living horse is instantly transformed into

a skeleton, by stopping the camera and restarting. ‘Skeletons’, Purves notes ‘are a recurring theme in animation – it is, after all, about giving life to that which does not have life’ (2010, p.14).

This theme is echoed in the supernatural conjurations of objects and their apparent independence of movement in J. Stuart Blackton’s *The Haunted Hotel* (1907). The film is a cross-pollination of the tricks of Méliès with something more recognisable as stop motion, as objects appear and disappear, or move as if possessed of some sentience. *The Haunted Hotel* employs a combination of the stop/start technique utilised by Méliès, together with a number of other stop motion forms which are described in the Introduction to this research, including object animation, clay and puppet animation. Ancient beliefs in the animistic are uncannily made manifest, and as Paul Wells points out, production company Vitograph exacerbated this impression at the time by ‘deliberately mystifying the process’ through which the effects were created (1998, p.14). Such animation was characterised as conveying ‘a particularly enigmatic quality, signifying *kineticism* yet denying its source and possible intention’ (1998, p.15); as a consequence, Wells states, ‘the material and specifically non-human seemed invested with life’ (1998, p.14). Further, the ‘haunted’ implications of the title bestow upon the film an aura of the ghostly, and a connection to the dead.

Another significant feature of Blackton’s stop motion is that the objects and puppets he brings to some semblance of life are very often invested with a sinister playfulness. An ominous looking knife cuts the visitor’s bread for him and then rests with its blade turned upwards; a pot pours its steaming hot contents into a cup, which is then overfilled by a clown-like figure, who emerges from the milk jug and tips far too much into the cup before popping back inside. The visitor tries to catch him but the troublemaker is instantly transformed into a napkin that flies around the room. The things brought to life by stop motion are endowed with a mischievous quality, that belies a threatening undertone. This

uncanny streak of playful yet malevolent animism will reappear in numerous other examples from stop motion work, such as the demons in the original trilogy of *Evil Dead* films (Raimi, 1981, 1987, 1992) or many of the objects that spring to apparent life in the films of Jan Švankmajer, examined in more detail in Chapter 4.

The ‘insect’ films that characterise the early work of Wladyslaw Starewicz are imbued with an impression of the uncanny through imitation, the complex lives of his creatures deliberately mimicking – and often mocking – human ones. The insects he uses are dead ones that have been reanimated through stop motion processes, their limbs removed and then reattached with wax so they can be manipulated. His narratives play out like human dramas, none more so than *The Cameraman’s Revenge* (1912), which uses sets that imitate human environments such as a house, a theatre and a cinema. The film tells a story of infidelity discovered, and concludes with a film within a film of the deception, projected to a crowd of onlookers. Starewicz’s depth of staging, and his use of ‘puppet’ insects that can be easily articulated, create a sense of uncanniness by closely mimicking reality and through the suggestion that they are revealing something previously concealed or overlooked. It is an idea that J.P. Telotte expresses in his book *Animating Space: From Mickey to Wall-E*, when he writes that Starewicz’s strategy ‘is to take his audience into a normally unseen or hidden realm, thereby revealing not only its depths but also its similarities to our own world and, ultimately, the normally unseen – or purposely hidden – dimensions of that world’ (2010, p.39). In creating a microcosmic, secret universe that simulates our own, in which creatures appear to act and move like humans, Starewicz draws on stop motion to intimate the presence of something unseen and hidden in our world, an idea that chimes closely with Freud’s conception of the uncanny.

Another striking example of how the work of Starewicz embodies the concerns of the uncanny, and of the dark themes it explores, is *The Devil’s Ball*, also known as *The Mascot*



(1933), a film that mixes live action with object and puppet animation to relate the adventures of a clutch of toys abandoned by accident on the streets of a rough urban neighbourhood. Their status as the ‘forgotten ones’ who are forced to survive in the shadows, coldly ignored by the bustle of modernity around them, could be read as an allegory for the relationship between stop motion/animation and mainstream cinema, reflecting too the marginal status of the uncanny and the work of Georges Bataille. It also echoes the conditions of those in human society who, through the vagaries of fate, find themselves relegated to the bottom of the social pyramid. The social structure articulated by the film is one that Bataille and his dissident Surrealist colleagues sought to oppose and envisioned bringing down through the reduction of all to the most base. In ‘The Moral Meaning of Sociology’, Bataille comments on how ‘there is a sort of “horrible majesty”, an unassimilable quality, about the man of the lower depths in our towns, which is not foreign to the character of the sacred’ (Richardson 1994, p.106).

In many respects, *The Devil’s Ball* is an ode to dirt, darkness and the downtrodden, undesirable objects from every street corner and gutter coming together with the toys to revel in their lowly, filth-ridden condition. As the town clock strikes midnight, all manner of detritus from the street is brought juddering to stop motion life. Alongside the discarded dolls and soft playthings, there are scraps of paper, twigs, leaves, old balloons and even rotting fruit and vegetables who join the final dance of deprivation, a sequence that is uncanny in its animism and also Bataillean in its glorifying of the lowest social denominator. Darkness and its uncanny associations are rendered visible in the stop motion animations of the marginalised. It is significant that Paul Wells includes the film in his book *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch*, where he describes it as exhibiting ‘a claustrophobic sense of death and decay’ and ‘an ambivalent and destructive animality underpinning human conduct’ (2004, p.101), something both Freud and Bataille recognise.

Stop motion can compel us to stare into the face of our fears and phobias, its odd kineticism drawing attention to the narrative from which it can often appear to be escaping, like some untamed beast. Its effect is striking, as it simultaneously mesmerises and unnerves through the idiosyncratic movements of its unique construction. The distinctiveness of its form makes us focus more intently on uncanny concerns such as the blur between the living and the lifeless, and reflect on the human experience. In *King Kong* (Cooper & Schoedsack, 1933) this notion of confronting what we might not wish to see is explicitly referenced within the text. Noel Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror* sets the scene for the viewer, which takes place 'on the ship during the journey to Skull Island in which the fictional director, Carl Denham, stages a screen test for Ann Darrow, the heroine of the film within the film' (1990, p.18). It is the moment when, as he imagines it, she will be confronted by Kong, and he's eager to see what her reactions might be to this first glimpse of the mythical beast:

Denham says to Darrow: "Now you look higher. You're amazed. Your eyes open wider. It's horrible, Ann, but you can't look away. There's no chance for you, Ann – no escape. You're helpless, Ann, helpless. There's just one chance. If you can scream – but your throat's paralysed. Scream, Ann, cry. Perhaps if you didn't see it you could scream. Throw your eyes across your face and scream, scream for your life" (1990, p.18).

What is key to this sequence, of course, is that – as Carol J. Clover points out in *Men, Women & Chainsaws* – 'Ann is not looking at an actual monster at this point' (1993, p.167): she is merely being asked to conjure it in her mind's eye. This idea of looking, specifically, as the conduit through which we perceive the universe is often toyed with in horror. Whilst ostensibly the world around us is there to look upon and learn from, there is much – as horror frequently reminds us – that is hidden from conventional sight, in dark corners, cellars, alleyways, and so on. This correlates with the idea that we conceal aspects of ourselves behind a human façade, in a dark corner. Truly seeing is actually about more than simply looking, and in the scene from *King Kong* we are given a stark reminder of this fact. What Ann imagines in her mind draws upon primal fear, the uncanny resonating from a time and

place at once distant and immediate, and when she screams it is at something she senses is coming. The creature that Denham invokes for her is mesmeric, she ‘can’t look away’, and it could be implied that what Denham is actually preparing her for is the unique experience of a stop motion monster, something that horrifies by blurring the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate, between presence and absence, the hidden and the revealed.

‘One of the miracles of cinema’, as Carroll describes it in his essay ‘King Kong: Ape & Essence’, both the stop motion creature and the film are capable of ‘beguiling audiences of all ages and every intellectual pretension’ (2004, p.213). Surrealist thinkers, certainly, were beguiled: Jean Ferry, for instance, writes in ‘Concerning King Kong’ of the value attached to ‘what flows naturally from the involuntary liberation of elements in themselves heavy with oneiric power, with strangeness, and with the horrible’ (2000, p.161). Even if he judges that ‘the quality of the trick work is extremely uneven’, a matter of personal opinion, perhaps, it remains difficult for Ferry to ‘escape the feeling of *unheimlich*, of disquieting strangeness, that we cherish and cultivate, for our part so carefully, and which nothing brings to life as readily, and rightly so, as being in the company of automata’ (2000, p.164). In other words, the uncanniness of *King Kong*, as seen through the eyes of Ferry, is profoundly rooted in the ape’s stop motion mimicry of ‘a supposedly living beast’ (2000, p.164).

His encapsulation of how the stop motion technique impresses itself upon the audience of *King Kong*, ‘the acute sensation of *unheimlich* with which the presence of automata and trickery imbues the whole film’ (2000, p.164), can be expanded to serve as testament to the uncanny effect of stop motion as a form within film. Visibly distinct whilst imitative, it compels and unsettles the eye at the same moment. Like Nathaniel in Freud’s reading of ‘The Sandman’, we are drawn in to close contemplation of the uncanny subject and are almost willingly complicit in the sense of disquiet it generates within us. We give ourselves freely to the illusion, perhaps because we are drawn to it in the manner of the pull exerted by the death

drive. We perceive in its strangeness the unsettling effect of darkness becoming visible and the revealing of that which is concealed, the fearful, primitive mortal perpetually carried inside. It is entirely understandable in these circumstances how the idea of a stop motion ape, an animal with close ancestral ties to humans – and particularly one who displays recognisably anthropomorphic qualities – can elicit both sympathy and fear from us. Kong is a stop motion substitute for the primitive that is sensed beneath the surface, as well as an embodiment of the Bataillean base, driven to his death atop the Empire State Building.

A great admirer of the stop motion work in *King Kong* would himself spend a lifetime in cinema emulating the monster's creation, in an extended series of what would sometimes sniffily be referred to as 'creature features'. Ray Harryhausen specialised in using techniques of object, clay and puppet animation in science fiction, horror and fantasy films to create a wide array of extraordinary beings, from aliens to dinosaurs. His uncanny menagerie is somewhat reminiscent of the rogues' gallery Milton envisions surrounding Satan in *Paradise Lost*:

'Where all life dies, death lives, and nature breeds,  
Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things,  
Abominable, inutterable, and worse  
Than fables yet have feigned, or fear conceived,  
Gorgons and hydras, and chimeras dire' (2008, p.48).

From the spiny ridge of the Rhedosaurus surfacing in New York's harbour (*The Beast from 20000 Fathoms*, Lourié 1953) to an undead army of skeletons with swords (*Jason & the Argonauts*, Chaffey 1963) and the ultimate embodiment of that which may not be looked upon directly, the gorgon Medusa (*Clash of the Titans*, Davis 1981), Harryhausen's images are thoroughly imbued with a disturbing sense of uncanniness. As Michele Pierson documents in *Special Effects: Still In Search of Wonder*, however, contemporary critics were predictably dismissive of the films, their animation and the evident technical abilities of their

creator, an attitude that Pierson credits stop motion fanzine *Pluton* with highlighting in a review of *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (Hessler 1974):

How is it, the review asks, that so few critics failed to associate the name ‘Harryhausen’ with what ‘would at the very least be an accomplished technical work’. Reviewers for the *New York Daily News*, *New York Post*, and *New York Times* are taken to task for criticising a fantasy film for its lack of realism, for failing to recognise the craftsmanship that went into producing the film’s intricate effects sequences, and for misrecognising the film’s audience (since ‘there seems to be no end to “the kids will love it” approach’) (2002, p.72).

The article captures the sense in which Harryhausen’s work has often been pushed to the margins, disregarded as ‘something for kids’. As noted previously, it is a fate characteristic of animation, and of stop motion, in general. Clearly, however, the ways in which his animated characters make manifest the fears and anxieties which are central to the uncanny, whilst entertaining the audience, belie this notion, as is the case with many other examples of stop motion animation. To take one notable example from the films of Ray Harryhausen, the skeletons that spring to a semblance of life in *Jason & the Argonauts* have the ability to entrance the viewer whilst at the same time unsettling them. Writing an obituary for Harryhausen on the website for magazine *Sight & Sound*, Michael Brooke offers some sense of this when he states:

Although Harryhausen never went quite as far as the Czech stop-motion master Jan Švankmajer in reanimating actual corpses, there’s always been a peculiar potency about his animated skeletons, whether appearing singly in the first Sinbad film or as a seven-strong platoon in *Jason and the Argonauts*. This fascination clearly stems partly from the way Harryhausen’s skeletons can’t help but emphasise our own mortality (2016).

Harryhausen’s human yet inhuman figures remind us that we too are vulnerable to decay and death. They also recall the spirit of malevolence that is characteristic of the object animation in *The Haunted Hotel*, the films of Jan Švankmajer and the *Evil Dead* trilogy, among other examples. It is not insignificant that Sam Raimi includes an elaborate sequence of fighting skeletons in the third of the *Evil Dead* films, *Army of Darkness* (1992). In her

book, *Phallic Panic*, Barbara Creed refers to the skeleton as ‘a life-size *memento mori*’ (2005, p.51), a phrase that means ‘remember you must die’ in Latin. The object’s uncanny connotations in regard to the human encounter with death instil in the viewer feelings of unease, which are intensified when it appears to be imbued with some form of life, as is the case in the stop motion sequences from Harryhausen and Raimi.

Since 1981, when Harryhausen’s last film and Raimi’s first were released, stop motion has continued to be utilised most often in the fantastic, horror and science fiction genres of film, and frequently in forms associated with Freudian categories of uncanniness. There are monsters that seem human and yet at the same time are concealing something unfamiliar within, such as the stop motion alien in *The Thing* (Carpenter, 1982), or the mechanical hybrids in *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1983) and *Robocop* (Verhoeven, 1987). Mischievous, and sinister, animistic creatures ‘peopled with human spirits’ (2003, p.147) are made manifest in *Gremlins* and *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* (Dante, 1984; 1990), and in *Return to Oz* (Walter Murch, 1985). Beings exhibiting symptoms of sickness suggestive of demonic influence appear in *Braindead* (Jackson 1992), in Raimi’s *Evil Dead* films and in experimental works such as Christopher James Miller’s *Ironhorse* (2010). And uncanny fusions of the living and dead take on human likeness in films including *Puppetmaster* (Schmoeller, 1989) and *Dolls* (Gordon, 1987). Michel Gondry’s film *The Science of Sleep* (2006) is one example of how stop motion is still probing the themes of the uncanny in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, through elisions of the boundary between fantasy and reality, made manifest through animism and what Freud calls ‘the superannuated workings of our mental apparatus’ (2003, p.150).

Building on the rudimentary techniques of Georges Méliès, stop motion animators continue to demonstrate a propensity for engendering uncanniness, and the dark subject matter with which it is associated, through a combination of animation techniques and narrative themes.

The chapters that follow examine in more detail the ways in which three contemporary animating entities in particular imbue their work with the same dark sensibility as Freud describes in his essay, and which has been depicted in the films of animators referred to here, marked by manifestations connoting death and the complexities of the death drive. Their films are unsettling examples of how stop motion in its various incarnations can offer a visual conduit to those primal and pre-adult fears and desires that are an intrinsic part of us, and whose rediscovery is a trigger for the uncanny. Further, the historically specific forms that their respective animated interpretations of uncanniness assume suggest that Freud's ideas on the subject, written on the cusp of modernity, continue to have a disturbing resonance in the contemporary world. As befits the uncanny, they are a blur of the timely and the timeless.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Eruption & Irruption – Stop Motion in the Films of**

#### **Shinya Tsukamoto**

##### **Introduction**

You're afraid to dive into the plasma pool, aren't you? You're afraid to be destroyed and recreated, aren't you? (...) You can't penetrate beyond society's sick, gray, fear of the flesh. Drink deep, or taste not, the plasma spring! You see what I'm saying? And I'm not just talking about sex and penetration. I'm talking about penetration beyond the veil of the flesh! A deep penetrating dive into the plasma pool! (*The Fly*, Cronenberg, 1986)

In the quote above from David Cronenberg's *The Fly*, scientist Seth Brundle is daring his partner Veronica to join him in his experiments with teleportation, whereby matter is deconstructed in one space and then reconstructed in another, creating the illusion of instantaneous movement. Having tested the process on inanimate objects, and then on animals, Seth takes 'a deep penetrating dive' and steps into the teleportation pod himself; unfortunately, he fails to notice that a fly has infiltrated the pod. The remainder of the film documents his gradual transformation from one species to another, human to insect. Initially endowing him with extraordinary athleticism and sexual energy, the mutation eventually starts to cripple him as his body is changed beyond all human recognition: his skin loses its colour and elasticity, his teeth and hair fall out, limbs become useless appendages and he begins to eat like a fly, vomiting over food in order to break it down and drink it.

In the *Tetsuo* series of Japanese films directed by Shinya Tsukamoto we see characters undergo similar processes of evolution, their bodies made the site of astonishing – and frequently disturbing – increments of metamorphosis. It is an uncanny display of the body



under siege, the familiar features of human biology rendered simultaneously unfamiliar by the introduction of a foreign substance, namely metal. A combination of object and clay forms of stop motion animation are utilised heavily throughout the first two films in the series to depict the mutation taking place from the inside and outside; pixilation is used to illustrate the way characters so affected can propel themselves through city streets.

In the 25 years or more since the first of the *Tetsuo* films was released, critics have written about them in a variety of contexts. In *The Avant-Garde Feature Film: A Critical History*, for instance, William E.B. Verrone offers *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (Tsukamoto, 1989) as an avant-garde case study, describing how it can ‘aptly be described as an experimental cult film’ that has ‘never entered the mainstream’ (2011, p.153). It is therefore able to interrogate subject matter that is ‘off-putting, risky, offensive and, somewhat gory’ (2011, p.153). Writing in *Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Cinema*, Jay McRoy connects the *Tetsuo* films with established Japanese film forms, explaining how the first of them ‘draws its inspiration from a nightmarishly surreal combination of the *daikaiju eiga* tradition and works of contemporary science fiction texts’ such as ‘the feature-length *anime* sensation, *Akira*’ (2007, p.140). The phrase *daikaiju eiga* refers to the giant monster films, of which *Gojira* or *Godzilla* (Honda, 1954) is the most famous; *Akira* (Otomo, 1988) is an acclaimed example of *anime*, the term used in English to describe specifically Japanese forms of hand-drawn or computer-generated animation. McRoy argues that Tsukamoto uses such antecedents as a means to explore the ‘paradoxical status’ of technology in Japanese culture (2007, p.140). A surrealist quality is apparent to McRoy in the way the first of the films resembles ‘a series of hallucinations’ (2007, p.140), whilst Stephen Barber has identified surrealist forms in Japanese culture as taking ‘only those elements from their faraway European counterparts that enabled them to confront their own urban and sexual obsessions’, drawing ‘productively

on the far peripheries of European literary Surrealism, especially on the work of Georges Bataille' (2002, p.136).

Barber and Steven T. Brown adopt a more directly sociopolitical approach to Tsukamoto's films in their respective analyses, focusing on the complex relationship between the characters and their urban environment. In his book *Projected Cities: Cinema and Urban Space*, Barber vividly describes how the terrifying mutations in the *Tetsuo* series 'evoke the fundamental human rip within the urban matter of transforming, corporate Tokyo', capturing 'the corroded residue of the city's void technological culture' (2002, p.147). In *Tokyo Cyberpunk: Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture*, Brown argues that '*Tetsuo* deconstructs the essentializing identification of masculinity with phallic dominance and violence by means of a biting transgressive parody that subverts the status quo of heteronormative state capitalism and the mechanisms of social domination that maintain it' (2010, p.10).

These perspectives are both useful and highly informative in relation to Tsukamoto's work, and they form an integral part of the reading of his films in this thesis. At the same time, however, they tend to confine discussion of his animation techniques to comment and analysis of the film's overarching visual style. The element of stop motion animation is often referenced but rarely foregrounded. Although Brown gives more attention to the animated content of *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*, he does so through a particular socio-political prism, which overlooks the relevance of the second film in the series, *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* (1992), characterising it as a 'co-optation of the first *Tetsuo*'s transgressive, parodic force' (2010, p.110).

This chapter will distinguish itself from previous academic work by, first, focusing specifically on the use of stop motion animation in Shinya Tsukamoto's first two *Tetsuo* feature films. It will examine how stop motion, in conjunction with a combination of make-

up effects and live action narratives, works to articulate a number of the dark themes that Freud indicates ‘turn the frightening into the uncanny’ (2003, p.149). Second, it will look at *Body Hammer* as less of a ‘co-optation’ and more of an extension and elaboration of the various forms of uncanniness that permeate the animation in the first film. These include ‘manifestations of sickness’ (2003, p.150), and of ‘forces’ from within the body taking control and becoming discernible on the outside, erupting outwards onto the surface. The associated sense that hidden ‘automatic – mechanical – processes’ are becoming visible (2003, p.135) is demonstrated through the gradual fusion of flesh with metal, and a frenzy of pixilation that sends Tsukamoto’s central characters charging unchecked through the city streets, an irruption of the familiar in a radically unfamiliar form. The complex meanings behind ‘the concept of the double’ (2003, p.142) are interrogated in this chapter through his films, as well as the ways in which the ‘omnipotence of thoughts’ is expressed (2003, p.147).

Latent associations between sex and death are explored in more detail, in relation to Freud’s articulations of the uncanny, and with extensive reference to similar themes at the centre of much of Georges Bataille’s work. The combination of death and the erotic features strongly in the stop motion sequences of both *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* and *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* (1992), and it is frequently expressed through sadistic, masochistic and sadomasochistic interactions. These are also recognisable as types of uncanniness, such as demonic manifestations, animism, intimate exchanges related to doubling, the sensation of being buried alive, and automation of the body. Further, this chapter touches upon the preoccupations with eyes and permutations of sight and seeing expressed by Bataille, by Freud in ‘The Uncanny’ and by writers such as Milton and Poe who articulate the notion of darkness becoming visible, since these too have a crucial role to play in Tsukamoto’s disturbing narratives, exemplified by the hidden form of the ‘rhizome’. All of these elements

help to articulate a notion in the *Tetsuo* films that the body is a site of uncanny revolution in the face of technological sterility.

## **Bodies Made Strange**

Shot and edited over a period of 18 months, *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* evolved from a short film Tsukamoto completed in 1986, *The Phantom of Regular Size*. Many of Tetsuo's core plot elements and most significant sequences are adaptations of those included in the earlier film, and a central feature of both versions is the utilisation of stop motion in a variety of forms. It was, as Tsukamoto himself has said, 'the main thing I wanted to experiment with' (Mes 2005, p.40), and this is clear from the way techniques of pixilation, clay and object animation are employed throughout the films. The story of *Tetsuo* focuses on two individuals: a young office worker – identified simply as 'man' or 'salaryman' – and a bizarre punk-like character, played by Tsukamoto himself and identified in the cast list as 'metals fetishist'. The two are brought violently together when the salaryman's car collides with the fetishist, an event which seems to trigger a metamorphosis in both that results in them becoming fusions of human and metal. The bulk of the film is concerned with this transformation and the strange connection it creates between the men.

The first sign that something has changed biologically for the salaryman is when he discovers an inorganic hair whilst shaving, created by Tsukamoto through a make-up effect. It is a moment of revelation that Steven T. Brown compares to a similar event in Cronenberg's *The Fly*:

Just as Seth Brundle began to suspect that the inhuman whiskers growing on his face may be a symptom of his molecular-genetic mutation, so too, the salaryman in *Tetsuo* begins to realize, as he peers self-reflexively into

the mirror, that all is not right with his body, since his shaver stumbles over what appears to be a metal whisker (2010, p.76).

More indications that the body is 'not right' follow rapidly afterwards, stemming from this seemingly minor issue of an odd hair. Stop motion animation depicts the changes as they happen, metallised extrusions appearing to infiltrate and overwhelm the surface of the skin, made possible through the painstaking technique of photographing the metal, stopping the camera, and adding more each time. What these scenes are indicative of is a sense of self under siege, the unsettling appearance of something distinctly alien or other among the familiar features of the face and body. It is a phenomenon that anyone who has witnessed visual signifiers of serious illness will recognise, the uncanny sensation experienced when we become alerted to signs that something sinister has happened to the body without our noticing. We are only made aware when its existence becomes visible to us, to the limitations of our own eyes, and this is often after the 'attack' from inside is well underway. It is what might be termed the darkness that is made suddenly visible in our physiology, a blur of the seen and unseen that alerts us to our vulnerabilities.

Freud offers manifestations of such a phenomenon throughout his treatment of 'The Uncanny'. He writes, for instance, of 'the fear of castration' that is projected onto eyes in the tale of 'The Sandman' but can also be perceived as spreading to 'other organs' (2003, p.140); he also references the primitive belief in 'the influence of demons' (2003, p.150) made manifest in certain sicknesses. Bodily symptoms of something 'not quite right' reflected back at us are synonymous with such fears and in the instant we are confronted with glimpses of our own mortality. Reminders of our proximity to death are, in the words of Freud, 'the acme of the uncanny' (2003, p.148). Moreover, like the character of the salaryman in *Tetsuo*, we are thrown into confusion by an image of ourselves that, whilst still familiar, has also become somehow other and alien. The wider implication is that we have failed to see something that

was concealed before us: our over-reliance on the limitations of sight, on seeing signs of something wrong, has let us down. Our body has let us down. It is a moment of revelation – body as familiar, body as other – that brings to mind Freud’s sense of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* merging in ‘The Uncanny’. And as the stop motion effects visualise the accelerating pervasion of the alien eruption in *Tetsuo*, the inherent flaws in our visual sense that failed to warn us, to permit us to see sooner the stop behind the motion, are laid painfully bare.

The salaryman’s predicament has resulted in him becoming simultaneously familiar and strange, a combination of self and other. His reactions to the stop motion transformations suggest horror and disbelief, recognition of the body but not of what is overwhelming it. It is a profoundly uncanny state associated with detectable biological or physical change, in which the individual develops a disorienting, ambiguous relationship with themselves. They are simultaneously the person they have always identified with as well as someone, or something, unrecognisable. There is a discomfiting blur, associated with doubling: we are ourselves and other at the same time. Robin Wood describes the concept of otherness as ‘something external to the culture or to the self (...) as what is repressed (though never destroyed) in the self and projected outward in order to be hated and disowned’ (2002, p.27). The difference in this case is that the other cannot be separated; instead, it is we who have been made monstrous. In ‘The Deviations of Nature’ Bataille suggests that this monstrous aspect of the self should be acknowledged, as part and parcel of the primal and base being at the core, and is not something to be feared, ignored or rejected. Observing that ‘a “freak” in any given fair provokes a positive impression of aggressive incongruity’ Bataille intuitively ‘a source of malaise’ about the freak that is ‘tied to a profound seductiveness’ (2008, p.55). More pertinently, he observes that ‘this impression of incongruity is elementary and constant’ and ‘it is possible to state that it manifests itself to a certain degree in the presence of any

given human individual. But it is barely perceptible. That is why it is preferable to refer to monsters in order to determine it' (2008, p.55). In other words, to a greater or lesser extent, 'deviations', or otherness, are often displaced onto an external aberration instead of acknowledged and accepted. The metallising stop motion effects that Tsukamoto utilises in *Tetsuo* can be understood as manifestations of such a primal element concealed within, and erupting outwards.

## **Sex, Death & Stop Motion**

Having attempted to cover the bizarre metallic 'whisker' with a bandage, the salaryman is shown, through live action scenes, as stepping back into a normal workday routine; he is unexpectedly waylaid, however, by an encounter at a tube station. Alighting from a train the salaryman seems to be sweating abnormally, and he takes a seat on the platform for a moment, next to a female commuter. When we first see her, the woman appears relatively ordinary, but in moments she begins to show signs of the metallising effects herself. Tsukamoto uses a combination of clay and other materials, including metal, to create a series of cosmetic effects that show the infection spreading along her arm and then across her face and body. The salaryman flees into a subterranean network of tunnels, but the woman gives chase and there is a face-off between the two in a men's room. It concludes when the woman appears to penetrate her victim orally. A frenzied burst of object animation follows, in which we see a first brief glimpse of the tentacle-like nest of metal infesting the salaryman's body, shot by incrementally increasing the amount of metal and editing the frames together to simulate acceleration in its movement towards the camera. He is then thrust out of the room and into the street by a sudden surge of energy, presented through a pixilation process which turns his gradations of motion into something resembling rapid forward propulsion; he

eventually comes to a halt in a mechanic's workshop. Pursued by the woman, the salaryman fights back and disables his assailant.

What is most intriguing about this sequence of scenes is the nature of the stop motion metal manifestation and the effect it has on those it transforms. Both individuals seem, at least initially, fairly timid and introverted individuals. Once the metal becomes melded to the woman's flesh, however, she appears possessed of a desire to inflict violence whilst at the same time aggressively sexualised, the substance serving to spur her on. When she corners her victim in the men's bathroom a metallised hand is thrust inside his screaming mouth, and there is an orgiastic display of rapid object animation. The overall impression given is of a sudden outpouring of uninhibited sexuality, coupled with the intent to inflict pain and, possibly, kill. The metal extrusions, and explicitly the frenzy of the stop motion behind them, can therefore be interpreted as bringing together two key preoccupations of Bataille, sex and mortality. At the same time the manifestations are made uncanny, in their embodiment of the pull towards the death drive and how it begins to blur with its supposed opposite, the sexual or 'life' instincts, Eros and Thanatos merging together.

The following scenes suggest even more strongly that this is the case. Alone at night with his girlfriend in their apartment, the salaryman dreams that she is equipped with a sex toy resembling a tentacle-like length of pipe. The appendage is abruptly brought to life through a series of jerking shots of object animation in which the pipe is worn and wielded like an oversized, thrashing phallus. The woman alternately caresses and attacks the man with it as he poses naked on all fours, his face caught in a series of frames that suggest both fear and arousal. The sequence concludes when he is sodomised violently. He awakes with a start, and his girlfriend tries to comfort him through seduction. An attempt at love-making is disrupted, however, when his genitals are transformed into a large, rotating drill, for which Tsukamoto has created a mechanical prop.



More elaborate stop motion manifestations of metal and machinery appear on the salaryman's body as he fights with the girlfriend, a 'combination of scrap metal and small parts from electronic appliances' (Mes 2005, p.51) joined with tape and pieces of rubber, shot for a few frames, and then built up again with more junk each time to create the metallising effect. Significantly, Tsukamoto's staging suggests that the mixture of sexuality and violent interplay is exciting the metallisation. The relationship between the two lovers is clearly informed by ingredients of sex fused with violence, as flashbacks to the car crash tell us: shortly after the accident involving the fetishist he witnesses them having sex nearby, an act initiated by the girlfriend but consented to by her partner. The apparent introversion of the salaryman is then, perhaps, symptomatic of someone who takes pleasure in being dominated sexually whilst repressing a desire to dominate himself, his innocent demeanour a mask of respectability that conceals a set of more primal instincts beneath. The girlfriend's reactions, likewise, suggest more than simple fear or repulsion at the sight of the transmutation. In writing about the sequence Tom Mes describes the girlfriend's attitude as 'a mixture of fear, curiosity and sexual arousal', adding 'there is an element of sadism to her behaviour as well and a complementary element of masochism in (the salaryman)'s character' (2005, p.65). The component of object animation utilised in these sequences provides a raw physicality and tangible sense of the visceral that enhances, through the deliberate and jerky nature of its movement, the impression of sexuality stirring into action, excited by being in the proximity of the borders of human experience. There are plainly few, if any, limits or inhibitions being imposed in *Tetsuo*.

The resultant collision of violence, eroticism and ultimately death for the girlfriend is a shocking sequence of events that both raises the spectre of the uncanny and makes physical Bataille's belief in the way these three elements are closely linked. The extreme distortions of the body, and the ways in which Tsukamoto depicts them, give the impression of biology

under the control of repressed fears and desires, as if the salaryman's most sadistic/masochistic nightmares/fantasies have been given release. It is the strange surge of dynamism that stop motion animation gives to the make-up effects in *Tetsuo* which provides the essential frisson of kineticism and suggests something hidden erupting outwards. Freud categorises the action of bringing such feelings into the open and rendering them physical as related to 'the omnipotence of thoughts', a 'covert intention to harm' made manifest (2003, p.147).

Ostensible dualism that becomes increasingly ambiguous is a central characteristic of the uncanny, as well as the drives at its heart, and there is considerable indication of this in *Tetsuo*, nowhere more so than in the intention to harm. It is never entirely clear whether the salaryman is horrified and resistant to the changes occurring in his body or is a willing victim. The scenes in the apartment with his girlfriend seem especially double-edged in this regard, preceded by a dream of stop motion sodomy which is similarly nebulous. Further, the 'intention to harm' affects the people around the salaryman but he himself is also damaged by it. At its core, *Tetsuo* is concerned with the blurring of physical boundaries, typified by the interplay between extreme sadism and masochism, violence inflicted upon others and upon the self simultaneously, to the point of actual death. There is a push/pull effect in the way the salaryman seems drawn towards violent, and potentially fatal, sexual encounters, even when appearing resistant to them, and is both fascinated and repulsed by the changes taking place in his body. A similar blur concerning issues associated with death, destruction and uncovering troubling aspects of the self is evident in 'The Uncanny'.

In the work of Georges Bataille, violence is integral to the sexual encounter, which lays 'ruinous waste' to its participant at 'the moment of climax' (2006, p.170). Tsukamoto's unpredictable eruptions of stop motion animation, at times where violence and eroticism coincide, suggest a complete lack of restraint, and a compulsion to take risks with the body. It

helps push those moments to the fringes of human sexual experience, where ‘the idea of death may’ – and in this instance, most certainly does – ‘play a part in setting sensuality in motion’ (Bataille 2006, p.107). It is the realisation of what Bataille describes as a ‘scabrous situation (which) is sometimes necessary to a blasé individual for him (or her) to reach the peak of enjoyment’ (2006, p.107). ‘Tenderness’ asserts Bataille ‘has no effect on the interaction of eroticism and death’ (2006, p.170) and these particular moments in *Tetsuo* make literal the ways in which ‘the fever of sex seizes us’ (2006, p.170). Tsukamoto manages to capture the sense of pleasure Bataille finds in ‘squander(ing) our resources to no purpose, just as if a wound were bleeding away inside us; we always want to be sure of the uselessness or the ruinousness of our extravagance ... the truth of eroticism is treason’ (2006, p.170). The object animations which come in surges in *Tetsuo* take that sense of violent passion expended to another level, by adding frissons of differentiated movement that help carry the bodies so engaged to new extremes of sexual exploration.

Shinya Tsukamoto’s characters are emblematic of the ‘crack in the system’ to which Bataille refers, the point where erotic activity becomes associated with ‘mortal anguish’ (2006, p.105). It is the collocation of these two which ‘at the deepest level ... belongs intimately to human sensuality and is the mainspring of pleasure’ (2006, p.105). A key ingredient of that pleasure in *Tetsuo* is the fetishizing of metal, and its commingling with human flesh, rendered by make-up effects that seem to move. It is an aspect of the film that may well be partially inspired by the work of Georges Bataille, and particularly the scene from his *Story of the Eye* which was referenced in Chapter 1, the encounter with the cyclist’s corpse. Tsukamoto was certainly aware of the gruesomely sexual tale at some stage: in an interview with Kuriko Sato he describes a moment from one of his later films that ‘drew its inspiration from Georges Bataille’s *The Story of the Eye*’ (*Midnight Eye*, 2002). The scene in which the metals fetishist collides with a car – and where Tsukamoto assumes the roles of

both victim and voyeur – corroborates the direct connections between the texts. *Tetsuo* embellishes the incident beyond the frisson of the roadside, however: the impact of metal *on* flesh is elaborated into a nightmare of metal *in* flesh made dynamic through stop motion, an uncanny fusion within the body itself.

A predilection for the same raw material as David Cronenberg is again made apparent here. A short list of similar ideas would include the horrific transformations of *The Fly*, the phallic substitution of gun in *Videodrome* (1983) and the insidious gaming organisms of *Existenz* (1999), attached inside the body. There is also, of course, significant coalescence in Cronenberg's choice to adapt J.G. Ballard's novel *Crash* in 1996, with its analogous symbioses of body- and metal-work, mechanophilia and what Bataille terms 'mortal anguish' (2006, p.105), the fearful excitement that emanates from straying too close to the edge of mortality. Strangely, Tsukamoto is echoing ideas from a book that would not be translated into Japanese until three years after the release of *Tetsuo*.

## **The Uncanny Machine**

Another important aspect of the uncanny that is central to these scenes, and to the narratives of both *Tetsuo* and *Tetsuo II: Bodyhammer*, is the questioning of whether something is animate or inanimate. By integrating the flesh of the body with metallised components, and combining live-action images with increments of stop motion, *Tetsuo* leaves us unsure as to whether the metallised components infecting the protagonists are living or not. It is an aspect of the uncanny which Freud at first dismisses as 'intellectual uncertainty' and somewhat 'irrelevant' (2003, p.138) but then appears to want to acknowledge and embrace, classifying it as the derivation of 'an infantile wish, or simply ... an infantile belief' (2003, p.141). As the salaryman continues to evolve/devolve, the metal contaminants exhibit the qualities of a

living entity and subsume the flesh, our ability to discern the human diminishing. The natural order appears overwhelmed by an unnaturally active metallic aggressor, and the blur disorients us: it/he shouldn't be alive and yet it/he is. Tsukamoto's blending of film techniques, live action intercut with images of object animation, clay animation and pixilated motion, serves to reinforce the feeling of animistic uncanniness: who or what is this, and how is it imitating life?

The stop motion Tsukamoto employs allows that which was previously concealed, the darkness visible within the salaryman, to burst out and overwhelm him. What begins in glimpses and flashes becomes unashamedly and uncontrollably exposed, jerking and pulling at his body in an exaggerated mockery of what would be considered conventional movement. It also distorts natural human mobility into something altogether more machine-like, and is therefore indicative of a person not in control of their faculties, or *something* that is perhaps not a person at all. It is a condition of the uncanny that Freud highlights in part II of his essay when he writes about the effect 'produced by epileptic fits and the manifestations of insanity, because these arouse in the onlooker vague notions of automatic – mechanical – processes that may lie hidden behind the familiar image of a living person' (2003, p.135).

There are inferences in the way Tsukamoto uses cross-cutting in his narrative which suggest that the salaryman's body is undergoing these 'mechanical' transitions because he is being controlled, animated, by someone else. Interposed shots of the fetishist monitoring events and manically manipulating controls would seem to suggest that he has some involvement in controlling what happens next to the salaryman. The sequence in which he is pursued through the tube station by a metallising female is accompanied by occasional flashes of the fetishist from within a metallic cocoon and this reaffirms the idea of a telepathic form of connection between him and those he infects. It is not unreasonable to identify the fetishist's role as that of puppeteer, engineering the stop motion that manipulates

the salaryman's body. In terms of metanarrative he is, by definition the director: Shinya Tsukamoto assumes the role of the fetishist himself in the film he is directing.

The editing appears to hint strongly that the salaryman is the victim of extremely powerful suggestion or manipulation. This external influence has in turn galvanised his body into sudden spurts of stop motion animation, made manifest in an ostensibly inert substance. It is a further example of what Freud terms the 'omnipotence of thoughts', essentially 'the attribution of carefully graded magical powers to alien persons and things' (2003, p.147). Tom Mes certainly seems to share this perspective, identifying the fetishist as 'a fantasy figure, a character with supernatural abilities that include telepathy, telekinesis, transformation at will and possession of other bodies, human and otherwise' (2005, p.64). It is as if Tsukamoto/the fetishist has in fact taken possession of the narrative from within it as an actor and from outside as a director and animator, obfuscating the divisions between the two and making it more profoundly personal, a reflection of his own, slightly twisted mind. It's an aspect of the film that raises some interesting questions about the nature of directing and the concept of the auteur, whilst engendering feelings of uncanniness through the elision of borders.

## **A New World**

An explosion of object animation heralds the arrival of the fetishist at the salaryman's apartment: cups are crushed, cars accelerate of their own accord, cooking utensils magnetise and a cat is made grotesquely metal. By attaching himself to the water pipe the fetishist appears to reanimate the girlfriend, whose body has been placed in the bath. Her psychotic, and violently sexual, behaviour towards the salaryman in the sequence that follows can be understood as a more exaggerated incarnation of the personality she displayed in flashes

previously, aggressively driven out and into the open by stop motion. The ‘rebirth’ also brings about her demise, however, as she is cocooned within a sack of what appears to be some form of soft metal. Tsukamoto uses a form of frame by frame clay animation to create an effect that bears recognisable similarity to burial beneath soil, from which the fetishist then emerges. The significance of the simultaneous exchange lies in what it represents in terms of the uncanny. *Tetsuo* stages the reintroduction of the protagonist to his antagonist as a stop motion birthing/burial nightmare, and in so doing he makes visual the ambiguous nature of the womb and its associations with being buried alive, and with death, that Freud identifies as profoundly uncanny.

This collocation of uncanny concerns is made more complex by the display of a sexual frisson between the two male leads, and as the film moves toward its conclusion the violent eroticism becomes more explicit. The fetishist has been shown primping his hair and applying make-up in previous scenes: it is as if he is preparing for a ‘date’. Now arriving at the home of the salaryman, the character thrusts a bunch of metallised flowers at him and straddles his body, expressing delight that he didn’t die. As their faces move closer he animates a TV and smashes it down on the salaryman, exclaiming ‘let me show you something swift – a new world’. This is expressed through a subsequent stop motion montage in which there are, again, intimations of birth, burial and death. Through a combination of pixilation and object animation, the salaryman is seen struggling to escape from a sealed plastic membrane; when he finally bursts through its transparent skin, a frenzy of wires and cables encircles him. They quickly subsume and overwhelm his head, which is substituted through cuts for a skull. The intimations of ‘a new world’ are thereby made physical through stop motion animation that conveys homoeroticism and a form of rebirth. The sequence is uncanny in how it makes the womb both familiar and strange, a site of both birth and death, as well as Batailleian in its notion of a revolution taking place at the site where the primal

drives towards sex and death violently meet. The scene is an animated expression of the dark matter from which ‘a new world’ is forged.

It is an idea echoed in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in scenes where Satan struggles to reorient himself to the environment of his exile. Swathed in a strange, ambiguous, visible darkness, Milton’s protagonist determines that he will acknowledge and accept its black character: ‘hail horrors, hail infernal world’, he exclaims, adding ‘The mind is in its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven (2008, p.11). In other words, Satan seeks to blur the lines that demarcate divisions between heaven and hell, rendering them interchangeable. It is a decidedly uncanny notion that links *Paradise Lost* to the concept of celebrating the horrific and to embracing darkness, which is central to the work of Georges Bataille, and which is made visual in the stop motion animations of *Tetsuo*.

Entering the final stage of the film, the two men engage in an extended physical chase and confrontation, both becoming increasingly metallised as the object animations and layers of make-up overtake their flesh. The pair are embroiled in a fraught wrangle for predominant power, still discernible as organic entities but increasingly buried beneath the multitudinous layers of encasing metal and manifestations of extraordinary appendages; each assumes the look of what Mark Schilling describes as ‘a moving junk pile’ (2007, p.141). They come to embody, in a sense, the curious mix of technology with an air of sentience that characterises many machines in the contemporary world, and it is in this merging of two states that an uncanny effect is created. In her article ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs’, Donna Haraway has written of the ways in which:

Late twentieth century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally-designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert’ (2002, p.69).



The implication is that, like the flashes of the mechanical that Freud identifies in his essay, and links to Hoffmann's human/automaton hybrid Olympia in 'The Sandman', we are evolving into beings who exhibit our own increasing state of uncanniness, alongside that of machines. The stop motion eruptions that the protagonists fall prey to in *Tetsuo* make of them uncanny reflections of the equally uncanny technological world that they inhabit, where machines take on human traits, and vice versa.

The words 'New World' are flashed across the screen at the beginning of *Tetsuo* and they reappear before the final sequence. The two thrashing, distended metal-men now meld into one and become an extraordinary mass of mechanised extrusions and partially human physiognomy, erupting into the streets of Tokyo in pixilated stop motion. Such physical conjoinments can be read and understood as misshapen, problematic twists on what Barbara Creed ascribes to Bataille in her book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, the notion that 'life signifies discontinuity and separateness, and death signifies continuity and non-differentiation' (1994, p.27); or to put it into Bataille's own words:

We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is (2006, p.15).

Bataille is describing a paradox he perceives at the core of human existence, the idea that we long for the timeless union that death would bring us, and yet in the same instant cling to life for fear of the alternative. Amidst this paradox there is the phenomenon of the uncanny, articulating the simultaneous forwards and backwards thrusts of the life and death drives. For Bataille, somewhere in this constant tension lies the 'little death' of eroticism. 'The whole business of eroticism', he writes 'is to strike to the inmost core of the living being, so that the

heart stands still' (2006, p.17), creating a momentary death, in effect. Stop motion animation can be seen as mimicking the effect of eroticism's 'little death' in its increments, the stops conjoined with motion and punctuating its illusion of life, its kineticism, with moments where 'the heart stands still'. In their amalgamations of multiple heads, bodies and other extraneous accoutrements, the conjoined entities given a semblance of life through stop motion in *Tetsuo* similarly straddle the borders of life and death, and in so doing offer defiant, uncanny ambiguity.

Sexuality, too, is a crucial feature of such conjoinment, by virtue of the intimacy it implies. Significantly, strict gender divisions no longer apply, two men brought together by stop motion processes in *Tetsuo*. John Milton envisioned uncanny creatures not dissimilar in Satan's ranks, ones who:

Can either sex assume, or both; so soft  
And uncompounded is their essence pure,  
Not tied or manacled with joint or limb,  
Nor founded on the brittle strength of bones,  
Like cumbrous flesh; but in what shape they choose  
Dilated or condensed, bright or obscure,  
Can execute their airy purposes,  
And works of love or enmity fulfil (2008, p.17).

Conventions of form and divisions between gender are no longer sacred in the world opened up to Satan in *Paradise Lost*, nor in *Tetsuo*. Biological amorphousness characterises these beings, like the primal ooze that marked our origins in an ancient swamp. These creatures move closer to becoming base, realisations of Bataillean philosophy. Such conceptions as that in *Tetsuo* also defy the 'natural laws' of heterosocial convention, two males uniting to form what amounts to a single, erotically-charged, rampant phallus, Godzilla-like in its proportions. In Justin Bowyer's book *The Cinema of Japan and Korea* Andrew Grossman notes how such imagery 'parodies cyberpunk's emphasis on adolescent masculinity' (2004, p.144), the homoerotic aspects of the narrative further subverting the heterosocial conventions of Japanese culture.

Tsukamoto's film dares to literalise on a grand scale the concept of eroticism unshackled from any possibility of reproduction, which in turn makes the salaryman's final line such a fitting one: 'our love can put an end to this fucking world', he cries out to his maker. Their spectacular transgressiveness is the *ne plus ultra* of Bataille's vision for eroticism, a continuity that is signalled by 'the blending and fusion of separate objects' (2006, p.25) which is symbiotic with death. At the same time it is defiantly non-reproductive and violently, rebelliously alive, as the stop motion irruption into the concrete jungle would suggest. The film's conclusion can be seen as a revolt against what Stephen Barber describes as the 'homogeneous spaces' of the city (2002, p.147) which reflect the homogeneity of Japanese culture and society in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, marked by gender divisions, a distinct absence of racial interbreeding and the concealment of homosexuality. The 'monstrous filmic body' that is the transgressive film and its mutated being are a reaction to such conventions, which are echoed in the technological advancement and 'glacial visual system' that characterises modern Tokyo (2002, p.147). The irreverent stop motion freneticism of *Tetsuo*'s characters offers a stark contrast, marked by destruction, the expenditure of energy through flagrant homosexual eroticism, and the uncanny pull towards death.

Signalled by an explosion on screen, the spark of their stop motion conjunction frees them from their repressed lives of hidden desires, made manifest through metallisation, and brings their new form roaring into being. 'Our love can put an end to this fucking world' is the final cry of what Steven Brown calls 'this parodic monstrosity' (2010, p.109), an uncanny being hurtling destructively through civilised suburbia. The frenetic desire to 'rust the whole world and scatter it into the dust of the universe' recalls similar ideas expressed in Bataillean philosophy. The sense of the primal also satisfies Bataille's criteria for the 'meaning of surrealism, if not its precise definition' (1994, p.71). *Tetsuo*, in its final frames, bestows upon us a stop motion manifestation which resembles nothing so much as Bataille's 'rigorous will

to insubordination' (1994, p.49), as well as an extraordinary depiction of the drive towards death and destruction which lies at the heart of the uncanny.

## Double Trouble

The concept of the double is another uncanny focal point of Tsukamoto's aberrant creation at the climax of *Tetsuo* that, like the stop motion effects of metallisation in the film, questions the integrity of the self and is connotative of death. Whereas previous scenes imply a telepathic connection between the fetishist and the salaryman, events as they unfold seem to suggest that one, or both, of the two rapidly transforming individuals is a doppelgänger for his opposite number. Freud argues that our understanding of the role of the double has evolved across humanity's history, to the stage where it appears as 'an object of terror' (2003, p.143), and this is reflected in the way each character fears his opposite number in *Tetsuo*, whilst also being strangely fascinated by them. By duplicating or mirroring who we are, and attaching itself to us like an omnipresent shadow – a darkness that becomes visible – the doppelgänger threatens our status as unique living entities. 'Originally an insurance against the extinction of the self', Freud informs us, and 'having once been an assurance of immortality' the double has now become 'the uncanny harbinger of death' (2003, p.142), negating the idea of 'I' and 'me'.

The stop motion Tsukamoto interjects into the live action narrative of *Tetsuo* is crucial in this regard. As the two leads square off against each other it is the object animation and pixilating effect that illustrates their resemblance and thereby makes visual the uncanny relationship between them. The resolution of the narrative in *Tetsuo*, in which the two sides reconcile and are ultimately conjoined, can be understood as the only satisfactory outcome in this context. If we assume that the double is a part of us that has been made discernible, a

metaphor for an individual's ability to reflect, and to self-examine, then acceptance of that part should be considered healthy. It should not, as Freud concurs, remain 'isolated, split off' (2003, p.142) but should instead be reintegrated. The question for *Tetsuo*, of course, is how to distinguish the original from the copy. The ambiguity of the tensions Tsukamoto sets up between the two protagonists in the film accentuates this. The final conjoining can therefore be read as interrogating the uncanny workings of the double.

Intriguing too is the Freudian idea that the spectre of the double represents 'all the possibilities which, had they been realised, might have shaped our destiny, and to which our imagination still clings' (2003, p.143). As discussed in chapter 1 of this thesis, doubles in this sense confront us with a multiplicity of alternate universes. Alternative selves are created at every turn, each distinguished from the next by the freedom to choose, and predicated upon the notion that independent beings determine their fate on a minute by minute basis. The double thereby haunts in the guise of self-doubt. Compelled to live in a linear reality via the incremental processes of action and reaction, not unlike the sequence of 'stops' that creates a sequence of apparent motion, an individual adds flesh to the bones of the double at each advancing moment. The double seeps uncanniness: resembling a version of us, it is in effect an inner zombie. Seemingly composed of nothing but death – dead moments, dead ideas, dead ends – it continues to live, feeding from the life-blood of its host. The potency of the zombie figure in horror cinema lies in its dogged persistence: it keeps pace, it relentlessly pursues, it never lets go. As much as a character might try to outrun it, or pretend it isn't there, the only option in the end is to accept the omnipresence of the zombie, accept that death will always be stalking them. It is the reason why so many zombie films end with all the characters dead, turned into zombies themselves, or continuing to flee. The combatants in *Tetsuo* ultimately capitulate before their double, however much they may try to fight against

it or run away from it, as the stop motion chase through the streets of Tokyo makes plain. The final conjoinment could, therefore, be considered a unification of the living with the dead.

## **Tetsuo II: Bodyhammer**

In a further expression of uncanny doubling, and the associated phenomenon of the ‘compulsion to repeat’ (2003, p.145) Tsukamoto elected to revisit the world of *Tetsuo* three years after its initial release, in the wake of the disappointing reception which greeted his *Hiruko the Goblin* (1991). *Bodyhammer*, as the film would subsequently be parenthesised, was produced on a much grander budget and filmed in colour as opposed to its predecessor’s stark monochrome. Whilst the diegesis itself is more expansive, encompassing more biographical detail of its protagonists, *Bodyhammer*’s themes and the manner in which they are realised on the screen remain markedly similar. A sense of uncanniness is thereby built into the film from its foundations, what Freud refers to as ‘the uncanny element in the recurrence of the same thing’ (2003, p. 145). Crucially for this research, *Bodyhammer* retains the vital element of stop motion animation in creating its effects, many of which are similar in nature to its predecessor. The uncanniness made apparent in doubling and repetition is thus made an intrinsic element in *Tetsuo II*, and in no small part through its stop motion.

Tsukamoto again assumes the role of the deviant in his own film, and once more he remains anonymous: his character is named Yatsu, which translates simply as ‘the guy’. The implications of such non-specificity in the context of a narrative which is preoccupied with issues of identity are clearly crucial. They are a reminder that anonymity, the removal of individuation from a person, lurks uncannily even in the words and sounds adopted as ways to differentiate one being from another. Of equal interest are the gaps between those particular words and sounds, which resemble nothing so much as the missing pieces which lie

between the forward ‘jerks’ in the stop motion process. Something should fill this visual ellipsis but doesn’t, and the viewer is left haunted by the presence of absence, a darkness and obscurity that disturbs. Likewise, we may not only contemplate what’s in a name but also what lies outside of it. Without names to distinguish ourselves, we are left vulnerable to non-identity and the threat of nothingness, what Bataille might describe as ‘a wave lost among many other waves’ (2006, p.15). Names are perceived as fixed points, key to identity and being, and proof of existence. The nondescript and ambiguous qualities of Tsukamoto’s nameless character, here and in his previous incarnation, instil within the two films a further pull towards the dark recesses of the uncanny, where clarity of identity ebbs away. They reinforce the sentiments generated within *Tetsuo* through its use of stop motion forms that seek to remove individual identity.

Ostensibly by contrast, the counterpart to Yatsu in *Bodyhammer* is granted an identification of sorts, Taniguchi Tomoh. The role is again played by Tomorrowo Taguchi, however, the actor who assumed the part of the ‘salaryman’ in the first of the *Tetsuo* films. Further, there is significant similiarity between the character’s name and that of the actor. This blurring between the two films, and between actor and role, enhances the sense of doubling experienced in the first *Tetsuo* and can be understood as an indication that *Bodyhammer* intends to go further than Tsukamoto has gone before, extending the uncanny layers of duplication. As I will argue in what follows, his continued use of various forms of stop motion as mirroring devices throughout the film underpins this idea, and in *Bodyhammer* the notion of doubling assumes a similar yet different guise: concealed genetic bonds are made manifest through object animation and pixilation.

The first act of *Bodyhammer* is predominantly a live action narrative, as Taniguchi’s wife and child, a young boy, both fall foul of Yatsu and his gang of hardnosed criminals. They form an undefined anarchic group, what Tom Mes refers to as a ‘skinhead cult, which

consists of athletes, bodybuilders and boxers who push their training regimen to extremes' (2005, p.93). In scenes set in industrial units and factories within an unspecified city, the film depicts Yatsu's band as variants on bodybuilders who inject steroids in order to create an illusion of physical superhumanness. They use metallic substances instead, injecting them under the surface of their skin, an elaborate variation on the surgery Tsukamoto's nameless character conducts upon himself in *Tetsuo*. Metallisation is perceived as an agent through which the body can become impregnable, but as Mes explains 'Yatsu's experiments fail: the deliberate introduction of metal into the body backfires and his subordinates literally start to rust. The mix of metal and flesh does not work.' (2005, p.94). Only Yatsu himself remains unaffected.

Unlike the gang, Taniguchi seems able to sustain a hybridised form, and from the moment his family are abducted a sort of 'metal memory' is triggered, the origins of which are revealed to the audience at the conclusion of the film. The capability to transform, to metabolise substances beyond flesh, blood and bone seems to erupt out of him from deep within in the manner of the uncanny, as if something concealed 'has come into the open' (2003, p.132). In terms that Bataille might use, the mutations undergone in *Bodyhammer* are like an extrusion of something base from a dark pit, a primal eruption that signifies revolution. The role of stop motion is essential to how this process is shown to start from within and spread outwards, object animations of metal shot as frame by frame stills signalling the approaching storm of change in Taniguchi's biology, like premonitory flashes of insight.

## **Roots, Tentacles and the Stop Motion Rhizome**



One can almost see reflected in such graduated changes which start at the infinitesimal level an echo of the way the body undergoes dramatic change as it ages. Similarly, transformations connected with ageing start within and then eventually become visible on the outside. Whilst Freud comments on the way ‘manifestations of sickness’ (2003, p.150) can at times make the body appear uncanny he stops short at making specific comment on the way the ageing process can make us feel, but there are clear associations with ‘our relation to death’ that Freud perceives as an uncanny one (2003, p.148). Moreover, there are a number of other writers who have made the connections much more openly. In *Uncanny Subjects: Aging in Contemporary Narrative*, for instance, Amelia DeFalco writes:

Later-life confrontations with temporality, that is, a new or intensified awareness of the differences between past and present selves, often produces uncanny intimations of the fundamental instability of selfhood (...) Later life, with its proliferation of personal narratives, can expose the chimerical nature of identity, rendering the subject a contested site, at once familiar and strange, in short, uncanny (2010, p.7).

By using object animations that increase and extend, their movements depicting the encroachments of biological change that are particular to the protagonists, *Bodyhammer* stresses the creeping inevitability of time’s perpetual forward motion and, by implication, uncanny associations with the body becoming familiar yet unfamiliar as it ages, decays and edges closer to death. Further, the film reveals the progress of the change as it starts beyond the limits of sight, as if caught by a microscopic lens; the truth is captured before it becomes naturally visible, which intensifies the sense of uncanniness, exposing what was hidden. The stop motion process of object animation enables these fears to be seen in extreme close up, catching them before the eye can.

The notion of a privileging perspective is crucial here. Both *Tetsuo* and *Bodyhammer*’s depictions of the progress and trajectory of the metallisation, from deep inside the body to outside it, include a stop motion sequence suggestive of magnification, and focused on what

appear to be tentacle-like sprouts of metal. They begin to move and quickly spread, overwhelming the screen. The sequence is reiterated throughout the films, emphasising the way in which the substance is dramatically transforming its host. It momentarily allows the viewer to see way beyond the limits of conventional human sight and reveal that which is, effectively, hidden from those affected. By focusing our attentions on such minutiae, Tsukamoto privileges us with a preview of coming attractions, the bacterium before the plague as it were. Through the privileging access of Tsukamoto's animating lens, viewers are afforded the dubious opportunity of witnessing this new strain in the process of becoming, a profoundly discomfiting, and uncanny germination making the familiar form of the body unfamiliar, and seemingly charged with an animistic sense of its own being.

Steven Brown sees in this 'plethora of stop-motion animated cords, cables, and assorted ligatures that frequently interrupts the narrational flow in *Tetsuo*' a visualisation of 'the concept of the rhizome, a key term in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari' (2010, p.98). The notion of the rhizome, or root stalk, conceives of a universe whereby an individual network – like that of the human body – comes into contact with others and in so doing creates something new and untried. It is, in essence, a kind of cellular connectivity made visual, what Brown refers to as 'an interconnected heterogeneity in a state of constant becoming' (2010, p.98). In terms of the intimate conjoinment that occurs between the salaryman and the fetishist in the final scenes of *Tetsuo*, Brown suggests that this 'exemplifies a rhizome by creating a multiplicity defined by its relation to other multiplicities of microevents with which it connects and becomes transformed and whose transformation it incites in turn' (2010, p.98). The reiteration of the rampant, stop motion tentacle at key moments in the first film, and its persistent reappearance in the second thus 'not only interrupts the diegetic flow ... but also visualizes the connections being formed between heterogeneous elements and forms of organization' (2010, p.98). In other words, the newly

devised rhizomatic beast that emerges at the climax is the embodiment of its brave 'New World'. Deconstructed and reconceived at the microscopic level the entity is poised to revolutionise, socially and politically, the macroscopic universe.

The 'rhizome' theory provides one interpretation of Tsukamoto's image, but there other associated readings which offer insightful links to the uncanny, and to the work of Georges Bataille. The propagating stop motion tentacle, apparently charged with its own spark of independent life, can be perceived as a disavowal of our most specific and personal interconnectedness to another, the umbilical attachment to our mother in the womb. At the same time, it can also be taken to represent an uncannily disturbing reminder of how shackled we remain to our biological origins, however much we may imagine we have distanced ourselves. Wriggling free of those first ties that bind, in the manner of the thrashing tentacle, there is a lingering ambiguity over whether this is what we actually fear or desire, which is articulated by Freud in 'The Uncanny'. He sees attachment to the womb as associated with both fantasy and the 'frightening' (2003, p.150). Further, as the uncanny notion of conjoinment in *Tetsuo* and *Bodyhammer* implies, there is a desire for reintegration which is coupled with a sense of dread at losing individual identity. So, is it individuation being sought by the rhizome as it grows and extends itself, or a return to bondedness, and conjoinment with others? The abrupt, jerking, three-dimensional movements of Tsukamoto's tentacles are the embodiment of this push and pull that lies at the heart of the uncanny, with all its double-edged qualities. In Freudian terms it is profoundly tied to perceptions of prehistory and to the status of the womb. *Tetsuo* and *Bodyhammer*'s 'assorted ligatures' seem to propel themselves outwards, via stop motion's incremental processes, but at the same time they are metaphorically associated with an inward trajectory, and attachment in an intrauterine, interdependent state.

Writing on 'The Language of Flowers' Bataille, like Tsukamoto, encourages focus on the rhizome and the root systems, peering into the darkness visible in the soil beneath the surface. He suggests that doing so might reorient us in relation to the universe, particularly where it is overly concerned with the vertical, the Icarian obsession with reaching for the heavens above. Flowers, he suggests, belie this notion in actuality, even if it isn't apparent at first glance: 'lost in this immense movement from earth to sky, (they) are reduced to an episodic role, to a diversion, moreover, that is apparently misunderstood: they can only contribute, by breaking the monotony, to the inevitable seductiveness produced by the general thrust from low to high' (2008, p.13). So how is the trajectory of upwardness undermined? 'In order to destroy this favorable impression, nothing less is necessary than the impossible and fantastic vision of roots swarming under the surface of the soil, nauseating and naked like vermin' (2008, p.13). What Bataille proposes here, then, is a break with the conventional view of a sunbathing, balletic flower pirouetting skyward, innately beautiful and the ultimate romantic motif. Common practice is to envision the flower from the neck up, petals outstretched in solar worship; but Bataille advises closer inspection of the rhizome, the hidden network under the canvas. His words both corroborate Tsukamoto's choice of privileging, magnified, stop motion images from the *Tetsuo* films and recall the inherent nature of stop motion itself, a form in which the surface is the focus whilst the root remains mostly hidden and overlooked. 'Roots, in fact', he states 'represent the perfect counterpart to the visible parts of a plant. While the visible parts are nobly elevated, the ignoble and sticky roots wallow in the ground, loving rottenness just as leaves love light' (2008, p.13).

The connotations of the root, in common parlance, are very much dictated by their subterranean location, as Bataille indicates: 'there is reason to note, moreover, that the incontestable moral value of the term *base* conforms to this systematic interpretation of the meaning of roots: what is *evil* is necessarily represented, among movements, by a movement

from high to low' (2008, p.13). Stop motion can be thought of in markedly similar terms, the stop as that which appears concealed beneath the motion. This simple disparity, predetermined by our conceptions of the vertical, is decried by the reasoning of Bataille's essay, however, where he urges us to truly examine the face of a flower. The majority, he points out 'are badly developed and are barely distinguishable from foliage; some of them are even unpleasant, if not hideous' (2008, p.12). His deconstruction of the myth extends further, to mockery of their brevity, infirmity and general lack of prowess as lovers:

Even more than by the filth of its organs, the flower is betrayed by the fragility of its corolla: thus, far from answering the demands of human ideas, it is the sign of their failure. In fact, after a very short period of glory the marvelous corolla rots indecently in the sun, thus becoming, for the plant, a garish withering (2008, p.12).

Therefore, the lasting image of flowers' true language, as scrutinized under the penetrative gaze of Bataillean philosophy, is that of an Icarian pretender briskly dispatched back to the earth in which it was first fertilised:

Risen from the stench of the manure pile – even though it seemed for a moment to have escaped it in a flight of angelic and lyrical purity – the flower seems to relapse abruptly into its original squalor: the most ideal is rapidly reduced to a wisp of aerial manure (2008, p.12).

Further, unlike leaves which 'lose nothing of their beauty, even after they have died' flowers age dishonestly, withering 'like old and overly made-up dowagers, and they die ridiculously on stems that seem to carry them to the clouds' (2008, p.12).

In the interim the defiant, potent root system, interred at the lowest level on the vertical axis, thrives in the darkness of the dirt, its vigour nourished by the sunless environment it occupies. In this sense we might see in its restlessness and 'swarming' an organic variation on 'the uncanny effect produced by epileptic fits and manifestations of insanity' that Freud describes (2003, p.135), which hint at the 'manifestation of forces' stirring below the surface (2003, p.150). The stop motion metal frenzy that the equivalent 'roots' represent in *Tetsuo*

and *Bodyhammer* most certainly points to the flourishing of that which has been hidden, and suggests that the process is charged with the same sense of nourishment sourced from darkness, rottenness and associations with the primal.

## **The ‘Gift’ of Sight**

The fact that Tsukamoto’s motif of the stop motion tentacle, or rhizome, permits the viewer to see something which, ordinarily, they would not be able to observe is significant for what it infers about vision. Tsukamoto reveals what human sight seems to conceal. Our eyes are remarkable in many ways, but, as Tsukamoto’s animations suggest they can also be cruelly restrictive. Visual preoccupations seem often to be at the heart of how we perceive something as uncanny: as Sadeq Rahimi notes, uncanny experiences ‘are typically constructed through and associated with ocular themes and metaphors’ (2013, p.454). Moreover, it is often the problematic nature of human vision and whether we can trust what it sees that engenders a sense of the uncanny, as Freud would appear to imply when he recounts the tale of ‘The Sandman’. In a key moment from the story Nathaniel ‘catches sight’ of Olympia through a spyglass and falls ‘madly in love with her’, only to find out later that she is no more than a clockwork doll (2003, p.137). The inference is that oftentimes seeing and discerning are two different things, and an instance of uncanniness occurs as a result of the blurring between the two.

The fallibility of sight can prevent a person from being able to truly scrutinise at a microscopic level the proximity of death, disease and detritus, such as that which is revealed in the thrashing stop motion tentacles of the *Tetsuo* films. Its limitations might mean that signs of illness, of something not right about the body, or of ageing, are missed. Edgar Allan Poe treats this subject as black comedy in the story of ‘The Spectacles’, where his short-

sighted protagonist spies a 'queenly apparition' (2008, p.317) at the theatre and falls for her. Whilst he is enraptured there is the merest hint of a shadow, a barely palpable impression of something that troubles and intrigues him:

This state of feeling arose, perhaps, from the Madonna-like and matronly air of the face; and yet I at once understood that it could not have arisen entirely from this. There was something else – some mystery which I could not develop – some expression about the countenance which slightly disturbed me while it greatly heightened my interest. (2008, p.317)

The origins of the impression are discovered once he has wed the woman in question and consented to wearing the spectacles she buys for him. 'What *can* be the matter with these glasses!' he exclaims, and in a moment of uncanny repetition adds 'could I believe my eyes? – *could* I? – that was the question' (2008, p.329).

The object of his desire is subsequently revealed to be somewhat older than he had thought, at eighty-two. The shock and awe he experiences when confronted with this sight, through artificial enhancement of his vision, warns that he would have benefitted from more careful scrutiny, much like Nathaniel in 'The Sandman'. It is this tension between the seen and unseen, and between multiple perspectives, that results in an impression of the uncanny emerging from Poe's narrative, and from the Hoffmann story that Freud recounts. It is likewise apparent in the stop motion contagion that metallises the protagonists in the *Tetsuo* films and which moves unsettlingly towards the surface as we watch, revealed to us through Tuskamoto's privileging lens. The tricks of the eye are apparent to Milton, as he describes the 'darkness visible', around which Satan 'throws his baleful eyes ... only to discover sights of woe' (2008, p.5) in *Paradise Lost*. The eye, it seems, begets anxiety, as Bataille acknowledges in his definition of it for the *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*. 'It is known', he writes 'that civilized man is characterized by an often inexplicable acuity of horror. The fear of insects is no doubt one of the most singular and most developed of these horrors as is, one is surprised to note, the fear of the eye' (1995, p.45).

Freud places nervousness around the eye at the very centre of 'The Uncanny'. Hoffman's tale of *The Sandman* is replete with numerous references to eyes and seeing that Freud acknowledges. Olympia's true identity as an automaton remains concealed from Nathaniel until the moment her mechanic 'picks up Olympia's bleeding eyes from the floor and throws them at (him)' (2003, p.137). Her eyes thus prove to be as unreliable as his own. The sudden flash of revelation that is at the centre of these events is similar to that experienced by Poe's protagonist in 'The Spectacles'. And the significance of the revelatory moment is captured repeatedly in the stop motion cut-ins of the metal tentacles in *Tetsuo* and *Bodyhammer*; the effect is instantaneous, our point of view made suddenly uncanny through abrupt switches to an impossibly close and disquieting perspective. In that moment what was hidden away comes into the open.

In his essay 'Uncanny Reflections, Modern Illusions: Sighting the Modern Optical Uncanny', Tom Gunning develops an understanding of the uncanny that is tied to vision, and which is specific to the period of modernity. He writes:

in modernity not only does the optical uncanny become crucial and dramatic, but the modern scientific and technological exploration of vision and optics (such as the proliferation of new optical devices) multiply and articulate the possibilities of the optical uncanny' (2008, p.70).

He later adds that 'the uncanny occurs precisely in (the) split between vision and belief, triggering the experience of not believing one's own eyes' (2008, p.76) What Gunning describes, the notion that modern technology is imbued with a sense of trickery that disorients, could apply to the spectacles Poe's protagonist is reluctant to wear, or to Nathaniel's spyglass in 'The Sandman'. It is the problem of discerning supposed 'reality' in the modern world when sight itself is shown to be deficient and multiple technologies provide different perspectives. It becomes difficult to distinguish between the truth of one form of reality and another. Although Gunning does not discuss them in his chapter on the uncanny,



the processes of stop motion create a similar ‘trick’ effect by creating the illusion of movement, whilst retaining some semblance of their inertia. Because the motion they present is so deliberate, a product of the way it is shot as a series of short articulations cut together, the stop is momentarily but barely visible. A gap is created between vision that sees motion and belief that the movements cannot be real. The aura of doubt invokes feelings of uncanniness.

Vision and belief, perception and obscurity, are themes that inform Mikhail Iampolski’s theories of intertextuality in *The Memory of Tiresias*. He draws upon the Greek mythology of the eponymous prophet and his encounter with Odysseus in the underworld in an examination of blindness and its relationship to notions of ‘vision’. Unable to remember her own son, Odysseus’ mother sees but does not recognise him; Tiresias, however, ‘has retained the past and its images in the dark’ (1998, p.2) by virtue of his blindness. He recognises Odysseus in spite of a physical inability to see his face. The complex tale has a singular thrust: it implies that sight is problematic, and that true vision might be found in blackness, in the shadows. As with Freud’s reading of ‘The Uncanny’, Iampolski attaches substantial value to the power of memory and how potent it can be:

It is no accident that blindness has become a sign of superior vision. It is the very darkness of memory that allows visual images to come loose from their contexts, forming new combinations, superimposing themselves on each other or finding hidden similarities. Metaphoric blindness becomes the condition of reading and insight. It allows us to break away from the persistent presence of the visible text, in order to raise what is known out of the depths and plunge the text back into its sources. (1998, p.3)

When a moment of uncanniness stirs in the ether of memory, Freud argues, ‘residual traces (...) can still make themselves felt’ (2003, p.147) and something is sensed emerging from the darkness and becoming visible in that instant. Likewise, the wormlike entities made to appear as if they are thrashing their way towards us in Tsukamoto’s object animation blink us out of the limits of conventional sight and almost imperceptibly transport us into a different way of

seeing. They seemingly permit us to see something beyond the boundaries of vision. Milton uses the phrase ‘the palpable obscure’ to describe the context in which such ostensibly impossible and nebulous sights (2008, p.41) might be perceived. Their presence is intuited and yet they remain beyond focus. They are decidedly uncanny as they slip between vision and belief.

## **Blood Brothers**

The shadow of memory plays an important role in determining events in the final third of *Bodyhammer*. The junkpile fraternity that Tsukamoto realises through stop motion at the conclusion of *Tetsuo* is embellished and intensified in its sequel when, in a spectacular return of the repressed Yatsu reveals to Taniguchi Tomoh the true configuration of their relationship, via what appear to be technological infiltrations of the human memory. His predilection for extreme surveillance and the mediating of biological processes with technological substitutes is readily apparent from the wall of flickering monitors he keeps in his den. It forms an externalised womb from where he can conceive and give birth to his brood of metal/man offspring; it is also where many die shortly afterwards. The curious omnipresence of the artificial eyes, capable of seeing everywhere at once, is a mockery of the limits of our own sight. Their reach is demonstrated fully during the ensuing extended tussle between Yatsu and Taniguchi, their battle simultaneously played out across a bank of screens. Tomoh’s wife is thereby able to witness every detail of the stop motion lurches and jerks, combinations of pixilation and object animation, that characterise their confrontation. It is as if the broadcasted signals are organically radiating from the bodies of the two leads, visualising what they see – or perhaps it is what they wish or desire to see. A similar

impression is created in *Tetsuo* where stop motion images play almost subliminally on the television in the salaryman's apartment, perhaps broadcast from the mind of the fetishist.

The violent animated exchanges amidst the junkpiles conclude with Yatsu's succumbing to the car crusher and, in an effect that uses a combination of object animation and make-up, his head becomes detached at the moment of impact. As Taniguchi approaches it, however, a stop motion cable shoots outwards from Yatsu's forehead and attaches itself to Taniguchi. For the first time the pair are physically joined and the effect is immediate, like plugging in a TV. The umbilical cable carries us inside the psyche of Taniguchi, an endoscopic examination of his repressed past conducted through internal organs and arterial passages, a mixture of accelerated film footage and object animations that include violently vibrating wires. A series of pixilated images show a naked Taniguchi being examined and attached to a metallic umbilical cord, as if recalling the womb and his infancy. There are animations of a head that resembles his, enshrouded in frantically writhing cables. A short sequence featuring a naked and pixilated Yatsu, wriggling around in a similar womb, is followed by an explosion, and then object animations depict a carpet of restless wires and metal components.

A match dissolve to a bucolic scene of a family strolling through long grass seems startlingly incongruous against the backdrop of urbanised chaos in the *Tetsuos*. The idealised impression proves, unsurprisingly, short-lived as a cut takes us into the family homestead, where a series of tinted, live action flashbacks recount what we suppose are suddenly recollected experiences. A father's experiments with combining flesh and metal are briefly shown, followed by a scene in which his sons, each brandishing a gun, appear to absorb the weapons into their bodies. The sequence uses object animation and artificial arms to capture the uncanny way in which the bones and flesh are distorted in order to permit biological absorption of the guns, and it remains unclear whether this is a moment of animism, the weapons assuming a life of their own, or an expression of omnipotent thought. The father

encourages his children to shoot at a dog, by pointing their forefingers at it in the manner of childhood games where guns are imitated. One son obliges, whilst the other is reluctant to follow suit. A final shocking flashback captures the moment the children bear traumatic witness to a sex game which goes horribly awry, when at the (literal) moment of climax a pistol – inserted into their mother’s mouth – fires accidentally. It proves to be the touchpaper that ignites Taniguchi, with devastating consequences. A flourish of object animation that appears to magnetise all metal objects allows him to disarm his father and, in an orgiastic display of perverse pleasure, Taniguchi laughs as he peppers his parents with bullets. Taniguchi’s facial expressions are a disturbing indication of the unhealthy delight with which he demonstrates his body’s newly discovered prowess, whilst his brother is transfixed in the sight of such horror.

This is, in effect, Tsukamoto’s interpretation of the primal scene, an aspect of Freud’s theory utilised by Surrealists such as Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí, who incorporated what Hal Foster calls its ‘visual fascinations and (pre)sexual confusions’ (1993, p.81) into their respective works. In the reawakened flashes of Taniguchi’s infancy Tsukamoto identifies the source of his abominations, and the primal scene becomes a hair trigger for the explosions of extruded metal through flesh that follow. The two protagonists are revealed as damaged and damaging aberrations haunted by a shared past that has now been recalled in every unsettling detail. Yatsu and Taniguchi are the two brothers depicted in the flashbacks, and as the stop motion ligature reminds us they are umbilically fused together as the offspring of a father with fatal perversions. The uncanny spectre of the double, represented by the protagonists in *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*, is thereby reiterated and extended by Tsukamoto in *Bodyhammer* to encompass the bonds of blood. Two films conceive two characters with twinned names and mirrored identities that subsequently, in *Bodyhammer*, are revealed as genetic duplications from the same unfortunate parentage. They are, in essence, an uncanny pair of reproductions.

In the language of Bataille, the brothers signify the ultimate representation of the life/death symbiosis. The die is cast at the point of their primal scene, an auto-erotic nightmare to which we are afforded privileged access and where there is plainly an intense undercurrent of sexual violence, which in turn:

causes a wound that rarely heals of its own accord; it has to be closed, and will not even remain closed without constant attention based on anguish. Primary anguish bound up with sexual disturbance signifies death. The violence of this disturbance reopens in the mind of the man experiencing it, who also knows what death is, the abyss that death once revealed. The violence of death and sexual violence, when they are linked together, have this dual significance. (2006, pp.104 & 105)

Stop motion images depicting the two men as fetuses in wombs with metallic umbilical cords suggest that these are uncannily constructed children, formerly mechanical beneath the skin and now openly so. Further, they were born from perversions associated with intimations of death and sexual disturbance, and the kind of violent eroticism that, as Bataille describes it ‘means a barrier destroyed. The barrier destroyed means the natural urge. Demolished barriers are not the same as death but just as the violence of death overturns – irrevocably – the structure of life so temporarily and partially does sexual violence’ (2006, p.106).

As in the first of the *Tetsuo* films, the two ultimately come together as one conjoined figure irrupting onto the streets in the final moments of *Bodyhammer*, and in the process the metaphorical bonds of brotherhood are made literal. It may be possible, however, to see in such familial proximity an incestuous perversion of the original’s homoerotic ‘battering ram’, laying waste to the mores of modern Japan. It is a proposition that pushes beyond the strictures of the heteronormative couple and mere homosocial conjoinment to encompass the entire family: brother becomes entwined with brother in an orgy of unmitigated destruction.

In the eyes of some observers, *Bodyhammer* can simply seem to be what Steven T. Brown dismisses as ‘less a sequel to *Tetsuo* than a larger budgeted co-optation or recuperation’ (2010, p.109) but perhaps Tsukamoto himself defines it more accurately when he says:

If I compare him to *Tetsuo*... this little brother is more like a cynical second son. As a parent I gave him a lot of love, just like my other children, but he still turned out somewhat cynical... (*Bodyhammer*) is neither an abandoned child nor a child smothered with love. He's kind of cynical, a child with mixed feelings (Mes 2005, p.96).

The sense of a family with broken children thus passes from narrative to meta-narrative, further evidence of the blurring of boundaries that is one of the film's most unsettling characteristics.

Summarising *Bodyhammer* for his book *Iron Man: The Cinema of Shinya Tsukamoto*, Tom Mes writes 'the conclusion for the character of Taniguchi is that "he found beauty in destruction", as his brother puts it... this conclusion is where the film ends: in the beauty of destruction, full stop' (2005, p.95). This can be expanded to say that it is the drive towards such destruction, darkness and death, that makes *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* and its sequel so disturbing, and which renders both films uncanny. The ways in which Tsukamoto expresses the push/pull effect of the drives, which in turn characterise the various manifestations of uncanniness that the films incorporate, are significantly enhanced by the utilisation of stop motion techniques such as object animation and pixilation. They give a unique sense of dynamism to his interrogations of the body's integrity and the identity of the self. The inclination to reduce everything to something base in the 'New World' of Tsukamoto is also disturbingly but successfully captured using stop motion. Its increments augment the sense that Tsukamoto's early animated work is making visual the writings of Bataille, focused on the blackness of the 'abysses in which from horror to horror you reach the truth' (2011, p.133), the various forms by which sex and death are brought violently together, and celebration of the root or 'rhizome', wallowing in the dirt and the dark beneath the surface.

**Chapter 3:**  
**A House & Its (Mal)Contents –**  
**Stop Motion in the Films of Jan Švankmajer (Part 1)**

**Introduction**

In my films nothing is only what it appears at first sight (...) Seeing our surroundings as a set of symbols which need interpretation in order to uncover the genuine reality without always remaining on the surface, is the primal viewing of the world. This is how children, tribes, surrealists and hermetics study the world. (2007a).

This excerpt from an interview with Michael Brooke for the online magazine *Vertigo* succinctly encapsulates Jan Švankmajer's approach to film-making, in his own words. It also demonstrates how closely Švankmajer is aligned to ideas expressed by Freud, Bataille and the other writers, thinkers and animators whose work is discussed here. Most interesting is the way Jan Švankmajer brings together the ostensibly disparate groups 'children, tribes, surrealists and hermetics', describing them as sharing a world view. Freud similarly sees the uncanny as deriving from pre-adult stages of human development, as well as from 'primitive beliefs that have been surmounted (and) appear to be once again confirmed'; he adds that 'primitive convictions are closely linked with childhood complexes' (2003, p.155). Moreover, the categories of uncanniness which Freud acknowledges in his essay include 'magic' and 'sorcery' (2003, p.149) and these are prominent among the defining attributes of those that practised hermeticism. As has already been noted in this thesis, an experience of the uncanny is central to both the aesthetics and the philosophy of Surrealism. In particular, there are close affinities between the Surrealist movement's concerns with a deeper layer of

reality embedded beneath the surface, and the workings of the uncanny which momentarily disrupt it.

Jan Švankmajer joined the Czech Surrealist movement in 1970, which had existed in its own right since the 1930s, and he continues to regard himself as a Surrealist, indeed more so than as an animator, expressing Surrealism's perspective through film as well as other art forms. Interviewed for French documentary *Les Chimères des Švankmajer* (a portrait of Jan Švankmajer and his wife Eva [(Schmitt & Leclerc, 2001 )]) Švankmajer states plainly 'I consider myself to be a militant Surrealist', a declaration of the strength of feeling he retains in relation to the movement; and in an article for *Animation World Magazine* he is quoted as saying 'I never call myself an animated filmmaker because I am interested not in animation techniques or creating a complete illusion, but in bringing life to everyday objects' (1997). Nonetheless, it is for a combination of Surrealism and animation that Jan Švankmajer has received the most critical attention, animated forms capturing the way that his work engages with themes aligned to the surreal, such as altered states of consciousness and the hidden life of the inanimate. Meg Rickards, for instance, has described how animation can 'interrogate previous representations of "reality" and reinterpret how that might be understood', which she sees as 'pivotal to Švankmajer's work', and which is rooted in 'his long-standing commitment to Surrealism, which subverts the ordinary and upsets the dichotomy of conscious and unconscious' (2011). Krzysztof Fijalkowski writes that Jan Švankmajer is 'sensitive throughout his research to the object's secret lives, its tactile messages and capacity for betraying its owners' (2016, p.199).

Both of these characteristics are also detectable in the uncanny. The first is an effect Freud identifies as arising 'when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, (...) when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolises' (2003, p.150), whilst the second is the 'covert intention to harm' made manifest through animism, and an



element of sorcery (2003, p.147). A number of observers have suggested that Švankmajer's films 'can more properly be said to fall into the realm of the grotesque' (Hames 2008, p.101). They cite his use of comedy as incongruous when considered alongside the horrific elements of his films, if they are to be regarded as uncanny. 'Švankmajer's material' writes Michael O'Pray 'which constantly meshes humour and horror, is more likely to be identified with the grotesque' (1989, p.256). This research argues, however, that the particular variety of 'humour' apparent in the work of Švankmajer is so consistently dark and macabre that it belies the incongruity. The audience of a Švankmajer film isn't made to laugh but is instead more inclined to experience forms of discomfort associated with uncanniness as something familiar is made to seem unfamiliar, as its hidden, playfully sinister nature is revealed, or as it suddenly invokes a primal or childhood fear.

It is this emphasis on the darker resonances in the horror and black comedy of Jan Švankmajer's animation that will be the focus of the next two chapters. This thesis will distinguish itself from existing research by concentrating more specifically on the stop motion processes Jan Švankmajer utilises to make visual what he describes as the 'heavy water' distilled 'from childhood, my obsessions, idiosyncrasies, anxieties' (Hames 2008, p.112), and by focusing on the coalescences between such an unsettling undertaking and Freud's categories of the uncanny. In contrast to most of the previous studies it suggests that Švankmajer's expressions of the surreal are more closely aligned with those of the dissident strain, and in particular the work of Georges Bataille.

It is Bataille who adopted the darkest, most extreme route to what he perceived as 'the principal, most decisive and vital, aspect of the meaning of surrealism, if not its precise definition' (1994, p.71), achieved through a reduction to the base and the primal. His admiration for the Gnostic perspective is, likewise, synonymous with views expressed by Švankmajer in regard to the hermetic. In an article for *Gnosis: A Journal of Western Inner*

*Traditions* Stephen A. Hoeller observes how ‘most of the Hermetic teachings closely correspond to fundamental ideas of the Gnostics’ (1996, p.21). Bataille has also expressed an interest in seeing the world as if through the eyes of a child. His piece on ‘The Cruel Practice of Art’, originally written in 1949, is illustrative of this. In one passage he writes:

Only a few of us, amid the great fabrications of society, hang on to our really childish reactions, still wonder naively what we are doing on the earth and what sort of joke is being played on us. We want to decipher skies and paintings, go behind these starry backgrounds or these painted canvases and, like kids trying to find a gap in a fence, try to look through the cracks in the world (Supervert, 1993).

The notions of deciphering images and peering through cracks correlate strikingly with the desires of Jan Švankmajer, who sees ‘our surroundings as a set of symbols which need interpretation in order to uncover the genuine reality’ (Vertigo 2007a). This chapter and the next will explore in more depth how Švankmajer uses various stop motion animation techniques to do this, including clay and object animation, puppet animation and pixilation, and in so doing develops concepts elaborated by both Freud and Bataille. They will show how his work connects with our ancient, pre-civilised selves and the inner child to whom we are forever tied, in the process confronting some of our deepest, darkest fears. Švankmajer’s animations are decidedly uncanny, made manifest in phenomena such as animism and the omnipotence of thought, and in their preoccupation with the elisions that can occur at the boundaries between life and death. At the same time they hark back to the Bataillean concept of the base and a return to the primal through their predilection for the natural world and its objects in their raw state, with all the dirt, detritus and decay that entails. This first chapter focuses on Švankmajer’s depictions of objects within the domestic setting, and includes an extensive analysis comparing Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ to a reimagining of the story by Jan Švankmajer. It examines how he routinely uses stop motion as a tool to make the most familiar of environments simultaneously unfamiliar, and therefore uncanny. It will explore how animism is made to seem both sinister and playful in

Švankmajer's films, flirting with the boundaries between life and death that are seen to collapse in uncanny manifestations. The chapter will also explore the ways in which Švankmajer's visions of home interrogate a wider context associated with the historical and social backdrop against which they were created.

## No Place Like Home

It is notable that Freud makes several references in his essay to the way the home can be made uncanny. This is aside from his crucial assertion that the German translation for 'uncanny' is, in fact, *unheimlich* or 'unhomely', with 'homely' its ambivalent twin in the formation of the concept of the uncanny. As Freud succinctly puts it 'the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, 'the unhomely') is in some way a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, 'the homely')' (2003, p.134). This research has previously noted how the two merge together through the workings of repression, such that the uncanny/*unheimlich* is always lurking underneath the layer of the familiar/*heimlich* or homely. The two are held in tension, since the contents of repression are stored forever in the unconscious. When a home develops an air of unfamiliarity it is a truly discomfiting experience, one similar to that felt when the body is made strange, as discussed in the previous chapter. There is a sense of personal violation about it: an intimate space that is well known has developed an aura of the unknown. Homes will often reflect their owners; through items of furniture and décor aspects of a person's identity, their personality and idiosyncrasies are, intentionally and unintentionally revealed. Personal traumas, such as birth and death, may have left a profound mark on the home. Homes are often so infused with the psyche of those resident that they are almost a part of them, an extension of them. So when something happens to make the home unfamiliar, and uncanny, it can be acutely disturbing.

Freud recounts a number of incidents where the home is violated in such a way. In his version of 'The Sandman', for instance, Freud writes of how Nathaniel is haunted by 'the mysterious and terrifying death of his much-loved father' as a child (2003, p.136), which he associates with the presence of the eponymous villain in his father's study, the fire in the hearth and the threat to remove his eyes with 'red-hot grains of coal' (2003, p.137). It is a trauma that changes forever the way Nathaniel perceives his childhood home. A similarly uncanny impression is communicated in the story entitled 'Inexplicable' that Freud recalls reading in the 'English *Strand Magazine*' (2003, p.151). It is about 'a young couple who move into a furnished flat in which there is a curiously shaped table with crocodiles carved in the wood' (2003, p.151) that in the evening is pervaded by 'an unbearable and highly characteristic smell, and in the dark the tenants stumble over things and fancy they see something undefinable gliding over the stairs' (2003, p.151). The inference of the tale is that 'owing to the presence of this table, the house is haunted by ghostly crocodiles or that the wooden monsters come to life in the dark' (2003, p.151). The home, Freud suggests, can easily become charged with uncanniness, given the right circumstances.

Stop motion is a form that can capture this idea visually, because of the ways in which it can blur the borders between the animate and inanimate, the living and the dead. The effect is both dramatic and blackly comic. Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo* films frequently straddle the thin line between these two in their violations of the body, and in the setting of the home a similar sense of dark humour and mockery can be achieved. It's a tone that Švankmajer frequently adopts, and in his depictions of domestic environments he turns to stop motion techniques over and over again as a means to visually express it. One of the earliest examples in his work is *The Flat* (1968), where an unidentified man is frustrated by a slew of objects that appear possessed of a mischievous malevolence, created through extensive use of object animation that makes things appear to move of their own volition. Upon entering the main

room with some difficulty, the man watches as his means of escape is sealed by stop motion stitches, which magically sew the door to the wall. He stands on a chair to adjust a picture and the legs suddenly shrink beneath him; when he examines them they re-extend and catch him by surprise, throwing him backwards across the room. A lightbulb seems to smash itself repeatedly against the wall, eventually revealing a hole; when the man looks through it he is punched by a mechanical fist. A glass of beer instantaneously transforms into a thimble as he picks it up to drink, an effect achieved by exchanging one object for another; and when he attempts to break an egg its cup smashes, leaving the egg whole. He throws the egg against a wall which appears to suck it in, like a pool of mud; but when he tries the same trick with his hand he becomes stuck, unable to wrestle free. The illusion is created using clay within which the egg is incrementally repositioned until it is completely absorbed, as if sucked in.

Uncanniness is everywhere in *The Flat* because anything lifeless could suddenly seem alive.

The war of attrition between humans and objects that Švankmajer realises in *The Flat* is reminiscent of the ways in which slapstick comedians, and particularly Charlie Chaplin, frequently encountered such obstacles in silent films. It can be understood as highlighting how easily the human body can become strange and uncanny by being embarrassed or made to lose its civilised veneer. Tom Gunning has written of how Chaplin's bodily humour exposes functions of the body 'whose control (and indeed concealment, if not denial) form the first line of defense in adult social behaviour' (2010, p.240). Like Chaplin, the character in *The Flat* makes 'his own attempts at dignity' but is constantly undermined (2010, p.240). The fact that such scenes occur in the home, within ostensibly controllable personal space, is even more disquieting.

*A Quiet Week in the House* (1971) offers a variation on the theme of rebellious, sinister domesticity, with a visitor observing the strange goings-on in the various rooms of a house through the keyholes. Objects that could be taken for a pile of sweets appear to unwrap

themselves, revealing that there are in fact rusting screws and nails inside. A disembodied tongue emerges from a wall and licks clean a sink full of dirty plates before succumbing to a grinder that transforms into pieces of newspaper. Švankmajer often utilises real body parts in his animation, as exemplified by the animal tongue; it is an aspect of his work that is explored in more detail in chapter 4. Pigeons are released and fly out from a desk drawer, but they lose their feathers and become cadavers. A chair takes ownership of the feathers and seems to be attempting its own flight. The attempt fails, and it smashes to pieces on the floor. All these images are connotative of death and decay, despite their exaggerated simulations of 'life', marked by dirt, rust, dismemberment and destruction. Michael O'Pray has suggested that the images have a social context related to the oppressive conditions then characteristic of life in late sixties Czechoslovakia. 'The horrors witnessed in the various rooms', he states 'suggest those of the unconscious mind itself espied by the authorities' (2008, p.50). This correlates with the impression of the uncanny they evoke, something hidden coming into the open. As in *The Flat* there is an accompanying sense of personal violation, of a home peculiarised by something repressed that has been exposed.

Jan Švankmajer frequently finds multiple uses for objects in his animations, too, and employs substitution, the exchanging of one object for another, which uncannily elides divisions between the two. A chair takes on feathers and becomes bird-like, or a tongue serves as a dishcloth in *A Quiet Week in the House*, for instance. It reflects the view he has about the world set forth in his interview for *Vertigo* magazine, that 'nothing is only what it appears at first sight' (2007a). Stop motion, likewise, is characterised by substitution and elision, the blurring of movement and inertia. Georges Bataille often employs substitutive techniques in his writing, such as those in *Story of the Eye* and in the string of metaphors he employs in articles like 'The Language of Flowers'. Their unsettling presence can engender disorientation and catch the reader, or the viewer, unawares.

Of the films that immediately followed *A Quiet Week in the House* it was *Jabberwocky* (1971) that would make the most effective use of domestic space to give household objects an inner 'life'. Most significant in its animations is the way that, again, Švankmajer makes disturbing associations with the absence of life, death and decay. For instance, he uses object animation to make a set of clothes appear to dance and fly but they are ostensibly empty. They are neither in one state of being nor the other, almost ghostly in appearance. Trees seem as though they are growing in the room, and they sprout both leaves and fruit. When the apples fall to the ground, however, they are shown to be maggot-ridden, the maggot a decidedly ambiguous creature who lives by feeding on death and rottenness. In a quite gruesome scene of puppet animation a group of miniature dolls crawl their way out of a larger doll by splitting her open; one doll is shown ripping through her eye. Uneasiness is engendered by the resemblance of the doll to human form, and the damage inflicted on its body, particularly upon the eye, which Freud and Bataille both note is fraught with anxiety. As if to further undermine the notion of a safe home environment Švankmajer depicts the occupants of a doll's house succumbing to a meat grinder. Object animations transform their bodies into pieces of substitute flesh. Some are flattened by an iron and placed in a cage, whilst others are cooked in pots on a stove and fed to a doll. The images suggest a form of play but they are also extremely disturbing, the contents of a child's nursery reimagined as uncanny entities. The fact that dolls are simulations of human form adds a further element of discomfort.

The title of the film recalls the poem by Lewis Carroll which originated in his novel *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). The poem, like Švankmajer's film, is playful and sinister, recounting the violent killing of a monster through a combination of recognisable words and nonsense, the two uncannily combined in the creation of a blur between reality and fantasy. The novel is similarly uncanny in the ways it

effaces the boundary of the real world, and in how it brings the hidden into the open; both are embodied in the looking glass of the title. By stepping through the looking glass Alice enters a frequently disturbing world that is seen yet unseen, seemingly hidden before her eyes in the mirror. Jan Švankmajer expresses a similar idea of ambiguity in sight through his use of stop motion, where life and lifelessness merging together, and where nothing is simply as it first appears. The objects Švankmajer imbues with the appearance of sentience through stop motion processes in his films are the embodiment of the looking glass world, familiar yet infused with a previously undetected strangeness. Carroll's work would become the source material for another film by Švankmajer some fifteen years later, with the release of *Alice* (1988). Aspects of the film in relation to the body will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

## **Švankmajer & Poe**

Although Jan Švankmajer has taken inspiration from a number of writers in his film work it is with the professed aim of creating something idiosyncratic rather than a literal translation. He makes this apparent in an interview with Peter Hames, affirming that 'my relationship to these authors has always been based on my personal experiences from "meeting them" (...) instead of objective, reverent adaptations I create subjective testimonies where the original author plays some kind of detonator for a personal explosion' (2008, pp.115-116). His description echoes the experience felt when the uncanny is made manifest, a subjective expression triggered by memory and suddenly erupting outwards. Švankmajer has adapted several works by Edgar Allan Poe, including one of his most celebrated short stories, 'The Fall of the House of Usher', written in 1839. A highly individual sensibility is apparent in Švankmajer's film; completed in 1980, it effectively translates the material into a different



medium, whilst retaining the essence of Poe's original dark vision. Both versions are invested with a strong sense that the house and its occupants are trapped in a liminal state. Everything that falls within the Ushers' sphere of influence is caught in a web of suspended animation, and Švankmajer's preference for stop motion embodies the sense of ambiguity the story creates, its apparent kineticism accompanied by glimpses of inertia.

The title of Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' unsettlingly communicates to the reader two dark meanings, one literal and the other metaphorical. Whilst the story is ostensibly about the tragic demise of an aristocratic family, its 'fall', at the same time it depicts the literal collapse of the grandiose architecture that is their historic home. Its title is an uncanny blur of these two ideas, both associated with death and decay. It is as if the rottenness of the bloodline has seeped into the foundations and infected them with its poison. The words of Poe's omnipresent narrator bear witness to the house's final moments, as it cracks apart and buries in its rubble the last Usher descendants:

While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened ... my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder – there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters – and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the "HOUSE OF USHER" (2008, p.141).

In this passage and the story that precedes it, Poe articulates a sense that the house, its contents and the surrounding environment have become possessed of their own faculties. Everything is alive in the world of the Ushers, a grim irony when their destruction and death is imminent. The house, for instance, is described by Poe as featuring 'eye-like windows' (2008, p.126) and its 'grey walls and turrets' are defined by their 'physique' (2008, p.130), a word conventionally reserved for characterising a human body. Various aspects of the architecture are imbued with sight through description of the 'tarn into which they all looked down' (2008, p.130), whilst in the narrator's bedroom he observes that 'dark and tattered draperies' are 'tortured into motion by the breath of a rising tempest' (2008, p.136). Even the

weather encircling the House of Usher is endowed with the ability to breathe life into slumbering objects.

In his book *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* Anthony Vidler observes how Poe's tale epitomises the portrayal of the house in many Gothic tales of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although the Usher homestead is particularly paradigmatic. 'The house' he explains 'provided an especially favoured site for uncanny disturbances: its apparent domesticity, its residue of family history and nostalgia, its role as the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort sharpened by contrast the terror of invasion by alien spirits' (1992, p.17). It is an uncanniness that the narrator detects from the start of Poe's story: upon his 'first glimpse of the building' he notes that 'a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit' (2008, p.126). There is a discomfiting feeling of apprehension and anticipation that brings to mind Freud's use of the word 'dread' in describing 'The Uncanny' (2003, p.123), the impression that something deeply unsettling is waiting inside.

Vidler doesn't discuss Švankmajer's stop motion interpretation of Poe's imagery, which is unfortunate as it provides opportunities for intertextual comparison, and for extending his statements regarding the interplay between memory and the present, and the physicalising of disturbance through animation. William Verrone offers a useful examination of Švankmajer's film in contrast with Poe for his case study of '...Usher' in the book *Adaptation and the Avant-Garde*, although discussion of specific animation techniques is restricted. Stop motion in its various forms is referred to only in quite general terms, such as 'Švankmajer's painstaking animation process' (2013, p.111). Stop motion is crucial to how Jan Švankmajer interprets Poe's disquieting, animistic backdrop. Stones, mud, bricks and other motionless materials are brought juddering to life as uncanny substitutions for people in Švankmajer's film, most often through object animation but there are also some disturbing uses of clay animation, creating the illusion of faces in inanimate objects, for example. It is through the

idiosyncratic movements of stop motion and their semblance of life that time is marked, ironically signalling the encroachment of death, destruction and nothingness upon the House of Usher. The spectre of the stop lurks perpetually behind the motion of the form, and in Švankmajer's rendering of '...Usher' it heralds the end, the final fall.

There is some indication in the words of Poe that the Ushers are aware of both the uncanny animism eating at their world and the dreadful inevitability of what is to come that it signifies. Švankmajer incorporates the passages as a haunting voice-over narration, indicative of the slow crawl towards rot and death contained in what is referred to by Poe as 'the sentience of all vegetable things' (2008, p.134). As Poe's narrator describes it:

The conditions of the sentience had been here, he imagined, fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones – in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many *fungi* which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around ... Its evidence – the evidence of the sentience – was to be seen, he said in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls (2008, p. 134).

The result, the narrator adds, was apparent 'in that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made *him* what I now saw him – what he was' (2008, p.134). The passage is paraphrased slightly for Švankmajer's film, and is accompanied by shots of a handheld camera restlessly snaking across roots and stones before coming to rest on a skull-like face that emerges from the surface of a wall. The illusion is formed through a type of clay animation applied to bricks and plaster, chipped away gradually and shot a few frames at a time so that the face is gradually revealed. Words and images, made dynamic through a semblance of movement, thus combine to recreate Poe's sense of an ancient magic with malign intentions. Freud references such a 'technique of magic' as present in 'The Uncanny', leading us back to 'the old *animistic* view of the universe, a view characterised by the idea that the world was

peopled with human spirits' (2003, p.147), which Švankmajer accentuates with an underlying playfulness that accompanies the malevolence.

A mix of the playful and the sinister is a key distinction between Poe's and Švankmajer's interpretations of the story, and its discernibility is closely tied to the use of stop motion and the director's professed desire to retain a connection with his inner child. Paul Wells describes how Švankmajer 'is, most often, creating a fictionalised notion of consciousness' which 'recalls the playful and liberal apparatus of childhood' (1997, p.178). Stop motion animation engages with this notion by occupying a space in films from which it can at times bleed into events in the live action narrative and 'mess with' their verisimilitude, their normality. It is this particular aspect of the form, its ability to disrupt the formalities of live action, that combines with the unique incremental nature of its movement, a mimicking of actual motion, to engender a playful yet malevolent quality in the films of Jan Švankmajer.

This aspect of stop motion is clearly visible in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, where it seems the purpose of the animistic spirits is to observe and participate in the destruction of the human environment. It bears some similarities to the progression of inorganic metal, depicted through stop motion, which gradually subsumes the bodies of the protagonists in the *Tetsuo* films, although the contexts of Švankmajer's and Tsukamoto's animations differ considerably. Tsukamoto was working in the social milieu of modern Tokyo's dramatically advancing technology and sterility; Jan Švankmajer sought a way of returning to filmmaking after an absence enforced by the oppressive Communist regime then in power in Czechoslovakia (Shevell, 2011). As he recalls in an interview with Peter Hames 'between 1973 and 1980 I was not allowed to make films at all' (2008, p.125). It was only because 'literary sources (...) provided him with a means of appeasing the censor' (2008, p.101) that Jan Švankmajer was able to make ...*Usher*, and the film is, unsurprisingly, characterised by an atmosphere of imminent threat, made manifest in the multitude of animated objects

converging on the house and pulling it apart. Jan Uhde notes that ‘when looking for suitable ruins to shoot (*The Fall of the House of Usher*)’ Švankmajer and his wife bought a small chateau in Bohemia, which ‘served Švankmajer as a place of refuge in times of political pressure’ (2007, p.67). The film is an unsettling representation of the animistic tone of Poe’s story but also of a very real human horror, expressed metaphorically through the animation of objects that undo the fabric of a home. Inanimate materials are substituted for the presence of people, and provide an analogy appropriate to both the uncanniness of Poe’s story and the specific context in which Švankmajer was adapting it.

The non-human elements exacerbate the sense of paranoia and flashes of mental instability which Roderick Usher clearly exhibits. As the narrator recounts, Usher:

was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth – in regard to an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion, had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit (2008, p. 130).

Usher is suspended in an uncanny universe, driven mad by his perceptions of a world where everything is alive and potentially watching, or listening. It is an appropriate theme for Švankmajer, whose life at the time of production was marked by a pervasive atmosphere of being observed surreptitiously. Walls literally did ‘have ears’ in 1970s Czechoslovakia, as civilians were routinely spied on, so the emanation of a face from brick and plaster is made more sinister in this context.

Crucial to the sequence of events in Poe’s story is the entombment of Lady Madeline Usher, Roderick’s sister, an unpleasant task in which the narrator assists his friend. Švankmajer depicts these actions with the use of a stop motion coffin, which eerily inters itself in the family vault. Object animation is used to capture the coffin’s journey as it advances towards the tomb. The impression conveyed is that of a director toying with boundaries, life and death brought uncannily together in the seemingly unaided movements

of a casket containing what purports to be a lifeless corpse. The addition of cutaways to the tops of trees, viewed from the perspective of the coffin as it shuffles along the ground, subtly enhances the notion of a sentient presence in the casket. Švankmajer's animation playfully hints at the tale's shocking climax, in which Madeline returns unexpectedly from the grave, whilst at the same time it echoes the wider context in which Jan Švankmajer created the sequence, against the backdrop of a country that had seen more than its share of bloodshed in recent decades.

Uncanniness is detectable under such circumstances, as Freud observed when he first formulated his essay, drawing upon the traumatic experiences of soldiers in the First World War. It could be suggested that there is also an element of the surreal about the image, the desire that Andre Breton puts forward in his manifesto for 'a certain point (...) at which life and death (...) cease to be perceived as contradictions' (1977, p.123). In Švankmajer's emphasis on the materiality of objects and on the physical movements of the wooden coffin, however, his work can be understood as more closely aligned with that of Georges Bataille. In the book *Avant Garde to New Wave: Czechoslovak Cinema, Surrealism and the Sixties* Jonathan L. Owen writes of the way that Švankmajer's animation of objects routinely 'proves messily material and often violent in its realization', and consequently 'the spirit of Bataillean materialism throws a spanner into the works of Bretonian idealism' (2013, p.196). There is an uncanniness about the way Švankmajer elides the distinctions between life and death in the animism of the coffin, but there is also a Bataillean physicality and baseness to his use of natural substances, such as wood. The coffin will later break apart, its deconstructed essence revealed.

Poe's treatment of the days leading up to the ensuing tragedy points towards the existence of a malevolent animistic presence in the lives of the Ushers. His narrator describes how:

Some days of bitter grief having elapsed, an observable change came over the features of the mental disorder of my friend. His ordinary manner had

vanished ... The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue – but the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out (2008, p.135).

What Poe encapsulates in this passage is something akin to ‘the uncanny effect produced by (...) manifestations of insanity’ (2003, p.135), which Freud identifies in his essay. The narrator’s fear is that these ‘inexplicable vagaries of madness’ will somehow be passed on like an insidious disease: ‘It was no wonder that his condition terrified – that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild fantasies of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions’ (2008, p.136).

The sleeplessness that results for the narrator is worsened by a storm, which Poe vividly describes in animistic turns of phrase, and which appears to foreshadow the uncanny end of the Ushers in its violent and erratic progression:

It was, indeed, a tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night, and wildly singular in its terror and its beauty. A whirlwind had apparently collected its force in our vicinity; for there were frequent and violent altercations in the direction of the wind; and the exceeding density of the clouds (which hung so low as to press upon the turrets of the house) did not prevent our perceiving the lifelike velocity with which they flew careering from all points against each other, without passing away into the distance (2008, p.136).

Švankmajer chooses to present this atmosphere in and around the home and its occupants in the days following Madeline’s consignment through gradual acceleration, building increasingly frenetic layers of object and clay animation in anticipation of the climactic sequence. When the voice-over recounts Roderick Usher’s agitated movements and changes in his character, Švankmajer depicts the tools used to bury Madeline as shaking, invested with the same restlessness as the characters. It is an analogous image he returns to several times, interspersed with handheld shots that literally ‘climb the walls’, unable to settle. When the storm starts animated stones are shown shifting, and they separate to reveal a crack, which widens as lightning illuminates the window. This in turn springs into apparent life as if energised by the elements, wildly rattling and creaking, and determined to shake itself from

its hinges. Eventually the pane splinters and smashes, allowing leaves and stones to spew into the house from outside.

There are shots of the grounds which capture a frenzy of activity, accompanied by the repetitious words of Roderick Usher: ‘And have you not seen it? ... You have not then seen it?’ (2008, p.136). Stop motion techniques associated with object animation are used to manipulate roots and make them appear as if they are writhing and swarming around trees before oozing out across the floor, raised from their concealment beneath the dirt. It is almost an echo of the images of thrashing tentacles that punctuate Tsukamoto’s *Tetsuo* films; they both engender an uncanny impression of something hidden below the surface erupting outwards, in spite of differences in their respective contexts. Like the imagery in *Tetsuo* and *Bodyhammer* there are also coalescences with the metaphorical depiction of roots by Georges Bataille, commingling together amidst the mud and slime like some primal courtship ritual. For Bataille, Tsukamoto and Švankmajer there is a common desire to reveal what has been hidden, a darkness associated with death and destruction that is made visible through animation of the root, or the tentacle. In terms of the intertextual relationship between Poe and Švankmajer, this violent, animistic manifestation of the uncanny both defies death and heralds it, offering a foretaste of the moment when Madeline is shockingly resurrected. Švankmajer reiterates the idea through a haunting animated manipulation of soil fragments, clay animations which seem to rearrange themselves in order to spell out the name ‘Madeline’.

## **The Mad Trist**

Seeking to temporarily calm the mood of his host Poe’s narrator proposes that they preoccupy themselves with a book, in words that are repeated word for word by the voice-over artist in Švankmajer’s adaptation. ‘I will read’ writes Poe ‘and you shall listen; - and so



we will pass away this terrible night together' (2008, p.137). It is a meta-comment on the nature and purpose of storytelling, particularly for children, although it is applicable to adulthood too. The interjection of a story can serve to distract momentarily and ameliorate anxieties; at the same time it might offer familiar echoes of circumstances in an unfamiliar setting. The notion is echoed by Švankmajer in his use of analogy through stop motion, objects as substitutes for humans 'playing out' events as if compelled to repeat them. The story within a story proves eerily prescient, and events start to uncannily synchronise and mirror each other, creating a doubling effect.

The chosen book is *Mad Trist* by Sir Launcelot Canning and it describes how Ethelred, the hero, reacts with drunken violence when prevented from entering a hermit's dwelling. As the narrator recounts he:

uplifted his mace outright, and, with blows, made quickly room in the plankings of the door for his gauntleted hand; and now pulling therewith sturdily, he so cracked, and ripped, and tore all asunder, that the noise of the dry and hollow-sounding wood alarmed and reverberated throughout the forest (2008, p.137).

A chilling twist occurs in Poe's story when the narrator pauses, noting that 'from some very remote portion of the mansion, there came, indistinctly, to my ears, what might have been, in its exact similarity of character, the echo of the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described' (2008, p.137). It ominously hints at parallels between the 'fact' of Poe's universe and the fictitious realm of Sir Launcelot, a blurring of borders between the supposedly 'real' and what appears to be imaginary. The sense of doubling is compounded by a manifestation of what Freud calls 'the omnipotence of thoughts' (2003, p.149), the notion that the mind is strong enough to influence what happens to us, and to others. As the narrator reads aloud it is as if the world around him is assuming a shape that is a variation on that fiction.

Švankmajer takes the same words and enhances their uncanniness through techniques of stop motion; like Poe, he parallels that which is read with the generation of an echo, but the effect is made more startling, immediate and dynamic by the use of stop motion animation. First, nails appear to twist and distort as if by some unseen hand, an effect achieved through object animations that build a frame by frame impression of misshaping. A long zoom shot draws the camera and the viewer closer and closer to Madeline's coffin until it seems to split open from the inside. Discarded leaves take to playfully dancing amongst themselves across the floor, and in a sinister touch the name of 'Madeline' is glimpsed in their choreography, almost subliminally, an arrangement achieved through stop motion. Švankmajer's editing creates the impression of an image caught in the corner of your eye, a visual metaphor for the distant echo that Poe's narrator believes he hears. It is a moment in which the visual sense is thrown into doubt, as for the briefest of moments the eye catches sight of something that may have been imagined, and perhaps desired or feared. Through stop motion, Švankmajer has made visual the uncanny spectre of the omnipotence of thoughts.

Returning to the story within a story, the narrator recounts the moment when, confronted by a dragon behind a broken door Ethelred:

uplifted his mace, and struck upon the head of the dragon, which fell before him, and gave up his pesty breath, with a shriek so horrid and harsh, and withal so piercing, that Ethelred had fain to close his ears with his hands against the dreadful noise of it, the like whereof was never before heard (2008, p.138).

As if cued by something unseen, the story is then interrupted a second time by 'a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound', the coincidence of which impresses upon the narrator 'a thousand conflicting sensations, in which wonder and extreme terror' dominate (2008, p.138). Roderick Usher's response is to turn his chair and 'sit with his face to the door of the chamber; and thus I could but partially

perceive his features, although I saw that his lips trembled as if he were murmuring inaudibly' (2008, p.138).

In Švankmajer's reading of the scene a chair slides around seemingly of its own accord and both the coffin and hammer that built it are seen to splinter and fall to pieces, objects gradually broken and shot a handful of frames at a time in order to simulate their self-destruction. Such fragmenting and breaking in Švankmajer's animation is something František Dryje describes as 'an act which is – immediately – unmotivated: decay, ruin, the spontaneous disintegration of objects, an ever-present threat' (2008, p.151). Michael Richardson, by contrast, suggests that 'this might be better expressed in more positive terms by saying that (Jan Švankmajer) never allows anything to be preserved, because preservation stifles the life out of things' (2006, p.126). There is in both perspectives an indication of how Švankmajer engenders uncanniness through sequences that show destruction: wilful decay and ruin is associated with the drive towards death, and preservation is aligned with repression that 'stifles'. When released, the individual is overwhelmed by feelings expressive of the uncanny. Like Švankmajer, Georges Bataille perceives virtue in destruction. As Paul Hegarty writes in *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist*:

Bataille seems to suggest that violence itself can bring about a change, without bringing a particular change: it is the violence that is creative. He writes that we attribute use value to revolution, but destruction is the real core of such action (2000, p.154).

The breaking and battering of Švankmajer's objects, activated through processes of stop motion, seem to connote death and mortality, but they also embody freedom and liberation, the release from repression, that is extended to the form of the objects. Tsukamoto expresses a similar idea in his deconstruction of the body, which is then transferred into the desire for a 'New World' in the *Tetsuo* films.

The concept of losing form embodied in destruction, of becoming 'formless', is one imagined by Bataille in his definition for the *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, where 'the universe

resembles nothing at all' (1995, p.52). It infers liberation but in such dark ideas one can also see correlations with the uncanny, the fear that is connected with a loss of integrity and individuation associated with death. Švankmajer's destructive animation makes visual these concerns, which are likewise apparent in stories by Poe, such as 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' from 1845, where the unstable integrity of form collapses the boundaries between life and death. 'The Fall of the House of Usher' similarly interrogates the divisions between the living and the dead associated with form through the animistic character of the house and the objects within it and outside its walls, the uncertain status of both Roderick and his sister as they hover between worlds, and the final destruction of the haunted house and its occupants.

The climactic moment of revelation in '...Usher', as the hidden nature of Madeline is brought uncannily into the open, is reached when the story Poe's narrator is reading approaches a similar point of conclusion. Ethelred leaves the dragon's corpse and makes for the enchanted shield he has been seeking 'which in sooth tarried not for his full coming, but fell down at his feet upon the silver floor, with a mighty great and terrible ringing sound' (2008, p.140). The reader's dreadful expectations are eerily met when the narrator becomes aware of 'a distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet apparently muffled reverberation' (2008, p.140). It is the final dreadful echo that Roderick Usher has clearly been anticipating:

*We have put her living in the tomb!* Said I not that my senses were acute? I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin ... And now – tonight – Ethelred – ha! ha! – the breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangour of the shield! – say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! Oh whither shall I fly? Will she not be here anon? Is she not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste? Have I not heard her footstep on the stair? Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? ... MADMAN! I TELL YOU THAT SHE NOW STANDS WITHOUT THE DOOR! (2008, p. 140)

Roderick's horrifying confession is rendered by Švankmajer in large part through a handheld camera which speeds quickly across stony paths and along darkened passageways like something possessed. It simulates the subjective viewpoint of Madeline Usher as she returns from the vault and waits outside the door that momentarily separates her from her brother. A number of stop motion cutaways are interspersed throughout the sequence, capturing the disintegration of the faces in the walls through processes of clay animation: they crumble and recede as if being eaten away, an uncanny spectacle of deconstruction that prefigures the impending dissolution of the family, consumed by the house and contents that surround them. Animated sequences depicting consumption are prevalent throughout Jan Švankmajer's work, such as the egg seemingly 'swallowed' by the wall in *The Flat*, or the doll who eats other miniature dolls in *Jabberwocky*. Jan Švankmajer's obsessions with food and the act of consuming are discussed more fully in chapter 4.

Poe's description of Madeline's reappearance implies an uncanny manifestation, animism combined with a form of dark magic conjured from Roderick Usher's confession: 'as if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell – the huge antique panels to which the speaker pointed, threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws' (2008, p.140). The doors that first conceal, and then horrifyingly reveal, Madeline are thus attributed with the characteristics of a living entity, 'jaws' which open as though animated through some primal sorcery. In the moments that follow, the Usher dynasty is forever extinguished, one sibling succumbing to the fate of the other in an act of uncanny prescience:

without those doors there DID stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the Lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold, then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated (2008, p.140).

Švankmajer uncannily elides the actions of a human hand by showing the door handle turning and its ‘jaws’ creaking ajar, apparently unaided. Most striking and disturbing, however, is his representation of Madeline, occupying the liminal space of the doorway. Gradually drawing us into the space through a slow zoom, Švankmajer match-cuts seamlessly to a stop motion sequence of white material upon which bloodied fingers appear and become gradually obscured as the darkening stains of blood overwhelm them and hide their awful secret. It is an artful, arresting and uncanny image of violence and insanity made possible by object animations that capture only the bloodied fingerprints in the frames selected, absenting the hands that made them. The crushing death of the two siblings is depicted through the tilt and collapse of a chair, which breaks apart and is left to rot under a swirl of stop motion leaves.

Object and clay animation is employed by Jan Švankmajer in the closing sequences to illustrate the self-destruction of the house and its contents. Walls appear to rupture and bleed stones, leaving gaping, vulnerable fissures, and the furniture is made to seem as if it is taking flight, tumbling from the windows into the swamp water below. The scenes echo the concluding words of Poe: ‘there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters – and the deep and dark tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘HOUSE OF USHER’’ (2008, p.141). The violent manner in which the furnishings make their egress from the Usher home also has wider connections with the history of defenestration in the Czech capital of Prague, where Švankmajer has lived for most of his life. There have been several distinct occasions in Czech history when defenestration, or pushing someone from a window, was undertaken as a revolutionary act in Prague, with sizeable numbers of people killed or injured each time (Webber and Feinsilber, 1999). Like the stop motion processes by which objects destroy themselves or each other in the films of

Švankmajer, the object animation used to depict furniture defenestrating itself in ...*Usher* can be taken to represent liberation and release, but it also contains dark, uncanny associations with violence, damage and death.

In the film's coda, a raven is transformed from an apparently living bird into a pile of feathers and straw through a series of stop motion shots which simulate the kind of spasmodic juddering one might observe prior to an unpleasant death. It is a grim reminder that the same surges and excesses of movement which can imbue a stone or chair with the beginnings of apparent life in stop motion may also be used to imitate the final death throes. One important distinction to note, however, is that the straw innards of the raven – one of Poe's key recurring motifs – suggest that the sentience of the creature was illusory: it was merely stop motion sleight of hand that endowed the imitation of life upon what is ultimately revealed to be a stuffed bird.

## **A Haunting**

The ambiguous status of the bird is in fact symptomatic of the film's nebulous approach to Poe's tale as a whole, particularly where it concerns the incremental movements of time and the complex interplay between life and death. Clearly, Švankmajer has been influenced in this matter by the style of narrative Poe often adopts in his writing, and more specifically the way he uses tenses to create elisions in time. It often seems as if his narrator is recounting experiences after the fact whilst at the same time he is drifting back into them, perhaps as a result of their vividness. Experiences of past events often seem to blur into the present, as if the narrator has been left suspended in time by the immediacy of the experience. It is a kind of ghostly quality that Poe brings to his stories, and which can be intuited in passages throughout 'The Fall of the House of Usher'. It is suggested by phrases such as 'I listened, as

if in a dream, to the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar' (2008, p.131), for instance, or 'the hours waned and waned away' (2008, p.136). Time drifts in the limbo of the House of Usher, and the spectre of death perpetually hangs in the air. As the narrator describes his approach to the Usher home:

I looked upon the scene before me – upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain – upon the bleak walls – upon the vacant eye-like windows – upon a few rank sedges – and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees – with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium – the bitter lapse into everyday life – the hideous dropping off of the veil (2008, p.126).

Poe himself was an experienced opium imbiber and on numerous occasions he inveigled the drug into the backstory of his storytellers. The drifting sensation that comes from taking a strong narcotic merges with the after-effects in his description, which appear to resemble both life and death, sobriety mixed with 'an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart' (2008, p.126). There was, he recalls 'an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the grey wall, and the silent tarn – a pestilent and mystic vapour, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued' (2008, p.127). He begins the next sentence, however, by saying that he was 'shaking off from my spirit what *must* have been a dream' (2008, p.127). The narrator falls in and out of consciousness in the House of Usher, like an opium addict. His recollections reflect both the notion that time has unfixed itself and that living and dying are merging together. It is a ghostliness, a haunted quality of uncanniness that is captured in Poe's turns of phrase.

The ambiguous nature of stop motion is the ideal vehicle for Švankmajer to portray this sense of drifting between states. Inanimate objects stutter into apparent life in order to visually convey the words that Poe relates, ghost-like, through a surrogate voice and which are reiterated as voice-over in the Švankmajer adaptation. The impression, as in Poe's original story, is of temporal elision. The voice-over speaks as if remembering, whilst a



depiction of past events is shown on-screen; it is as if the objects are engaging in some playful yet dark re-enactment of those past events. Time begins to blur, in the manner of Poe's writing.

The impression given is that the objects in Švankmajer's film, like Poe's narrator, may be caught in a time loop by the vividness of the experience, the animations and voice-over trapped in a strange liminality where time and space seem to be moving incrementally forward, but only as the film progresses. Once it is completed there is every possibility that it will all simply start over again, an uncanny manifestation of the 'compulsion to repeat' (2003, p.145). Everything inside and in the immediate vicinity of the House of Usher seems to be adrift from more specific temporal and spatial reference. The effect can be likened to the status of a film that is able to be rewound, paused, fast-forwarded or replayed at will, and thereby echoes the thoughts expressed by Mulvey regarding the uncanny effect created by film viewing technology. 'The cinema', Mulvey observes:

has a privileged relation to time, preserving the moment at which the image is registered, inscribing an unprecedented reality into its representation of the past. This, as it were, storage function, may be compared to the memory left in the unconscious by an incident lost to consciousness. Both have the attributes of the indexical sign, the mark of trauma or the mark of light, and both need to be deciphered retrospectively across delayed time (2009, p.9).

It is significant that Jan Švankmajer describes his relationship to the authors whose work he has adapted as based on memory, on the initial encounter. It is this relationship which leaves a mark, a 'register' that, if particularly disturbing, might be said to haunt the reader, and which Švankmajer captures and translates into the ghostly images of objects recreating Poe's story in stop motion. They seem to be remembering and reliving its traumas, as Švankmajer does.

The context in which Švankmajer created the animations for the film adds another layer of meaning, the reliving of past traumas associated with the threats of violence and death that confronted Švankmajer in 1970s Czechoslovakia, and which he continues to relive in the

persona of the objects attacking and destroying the refuge that is his actual home in *The Fall of the House of Usher*. The images of stop and motion, the spectre of death lurking beneath the illusion of life in Švankmajer's film, take the essence of Poe's story, and Švankmajer's personal experience, and filter it through the privileged medium of cinema.

## **The Raven & the Coffin**

As discussed earlier in the chapter, there is a notable presence in the work of Jan Švankmajer of an uncanny sentience possessed by objects which is presented in ways that seem dark and brutal, whilst at the same time mocking, playful and comedic. There is a detectable blackness in his animation which is shot through with a kind of cruel humour. It forms an integral part of what might be termed Švankmajer's conscious attempt to make the darker aspects of humanity, and of childhood, visible, through what František Dryje describes as 'humour blowing unrestrained over murderous stories' or 'transposed into the cruel free world of a child's vision' (2008, p.176). Among the stones, chairs, tree roots, wardrobes, leaves and other everyday objects that Švankmajer transforms into living entities in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, there are two items in particular which seem to typify this darkly comic approach. The raven and the coffin both stand out as particularly disturbing examples of Švankmajer's idiosyncratic treatment through black comedy.

The object animation technique by which an apparently living creature is pulled apart and reduced to a pile of inorganic feathers and wood shavings is both technically impressive and discomfiting as the film's coda. It recalls the idea connected to childhood of pulling wings from moths, or legs from spiders, but there is more of a sense of humour and play in how the creature is undone by invisible hands, as well as an underlying malevolence and darkness. The raven is first introduced in the opening frames, where to all intents and purposes it

appears sentient. In the closing sequence Švankmajer deals a cruel blow, one that feels like some form of sick joke; viewer perception is manipulated through a sly use of substitution and stop motion sleight of hand. It bears some similarity to the way Georges Méliès would exchange the apparently living for the ostensibly dead, in films such as *The 400 Tricks of the Devil*, or in *The Monster* (1903) where a woman is thrown to her husband and arrives in his arms as a skeleton. The cruel yet playful trick disorientates the viewer, and elides the ability to distinguish between states of being. It is an uncanny sensation directly wrought from stop motion, and tinged with a very dark sense of humour.

A similar effect is generated by the object animation used to bring the imitation of life to a coffin in ...*Usher*, an object which comes preloaded with all manner of associations. Whilst the movements of various natural and architectural objects and features fascinate and disturb in Švankmajer's films, there is something particularly troubling about the sense of play observed in seeing a coffin entomb itself. The sequence is unsettling, and underpinned with a gallows humour that is generated by the increments of movement. Švankmajer even adds an element of darkly comedic subjectivity to the sequence by cutting to what can be taken for a low angle point of view shot of the coffin moving through an avenue of trees, as if it were looking up at the treetops. The treatment mirrors the sense of disquiet felt when reading Poe's story once the realisation hits that the coffin's occupant has been buried alive, creating a fusion of life and death. Švankmajer playfully and disturbingly transforms this into something visual through object animation of the coffin. Further, when it splits open and later disintegrates there is a curious sensation that something sacred has been violated. The boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead has been violated, and a taboo has been broken, albeit in a mischievous fashion.

Švankmajer's repeated use of gallows humour and black comedy, even in the most horrific of circumstances, is explained by the director as a way of dealing with the absurdities and

contradictions of modern life, particularly in circumstances related to life and death situations. 'Black humour is important', he states, 'and must remain one of the essences of civilisation. I mean, the Americans are currently dropping bombs on Afghanistan and then immediately afterwards they are dropping food parcels' (Paszyk 2009, p.214). Its value as a coping mechanism for those confronted by death is well documented. Recounting stories of humorous moments by inmates of concentration camps in her book *Narrating the Holocaust*, Andrea Reiter observes how humour can become a natural response to horror. 'The will to humour', she writes 'should be interpreted as a drive on the part of concentration camp inmates and other victims of Nazism to uncover the comical side of a situation' (2000, p.126). These darkest forms of comedy don't necessarily engender laughter, but instead often highlight grim ironies about a situation. It is the reason why this research argues that these specific forms of humour remain uncanny, because they are based not necessarily on how funny something is but are more concerned with the elisions of meaning and illusions of opposition, such as those created through irony. This dark comedy can be humorous and yet not so at the same time.

By not shrinking away from creating dark comedy about the coffin in ...*Usher*, Švankmajer echoes the thoughts of Georges Bataille concerning erosion of the distance we place between ourselves as living beings and our own dead via the rituals of burial. As he writes in *Eroticism*, under the heading 'The Link Between Taboos & Death' the custom of burying our dead 'appears towards the end of the Middle Paleolithic' (2006, p.43) and has evolved with our understanding of what death represents for us. 'What we call death' observes Bataille:

is in the first place the consciousness we have of it. We perceive the transition from the living state to the corpse, that is, to the tormenting object that the corpse of one man is for another. For each man who regards it with awe, the corpse is the image of his own destiny. It bears witness to a violence which destroys not one man alone but all men in the end (2006, p.44).

The taboo that has built across the millennia within human beings, and which is triggered by 'the sight of a corpse is the distance they put between themselves and violence, by which they cut themselves off from violence' (2006, p.44). By closing the casket and removing the dead body from sight, either in a tomb or below the ground, the grim reminders of our own mortality are kept at arm's length and the taboo the dead represent is observed. Nonetheless, there remains a strong fascination with the corpse, and Švankmajer's stop motion manipulations of the coffin toy with the ambiguous sensations and questions about mortality and morality that are inspired by manifestations of dead bodies and how they are treated by adding elements of black comedy, which highlight the absurdity and contradictions in our attitudes to death. It is a notion summarised by Bataille in *Eroticism*: 'on the one hand the horror of death drives us off, for we prefer life; on the other an element at once solemn and terrifying fascinates us and disturbs us profoundly' (2006, p.45). He later adds that 'in the presence of a corpse horror is immediate and inevitable and practically impossible to resist' (2006, p.47). It is this form of horror – directly connected with death – that Švankmajer routinely injects with gallows humour

Ultimately, Švankmajer, Poe and Bataille are all cognisant of the fear and curious fascination that can be excited by the breaking of taboos such as those surrounding the corpse. 'Taboos founded on terror' Bataille writes 'are not only there to be obeyed. There is always another side to the matter. It is always a temptation to knock down a barrier; the forbidden action takes on a significance it lacks before fear widens the gap between us and it and invests it with an aura of excitement' (2006, p.48). Through object animation and other associated stop motion techniques, the Švankmajer vision for ...*Usher* embodies the complex ambiguities taboos like the process of burial represent for the human psyche, the origins of which hark back to the cave and the mind of the primitive. Violating such a taboo excites but at the same time engenders fear because it entails crossing a forbidden threshold, an idea that

is deeply engrained within human cultures, particularly those in Western society. It is why Jan Švankmajer often injects elements of grim humour alongside stop motion sequences associated with death, decay and the corpse. It draws attention to the way the living and the dead are so closely, and uncannily, intertwined.

The focus of this chapter has been how, in the stop motion animation of Jan Švankmajer, inanimate objects assume sentient characteristics and act out in playful, sinister ways their hidden lives, a particularly unsettling phenomenon when experienced in the context of the home. It has explored childhood and primal fears associated with uncanny manifestations of death, decay and the will to destroy, as well as associated notions of repression and the trauma of memory which have common associations with life in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Czechoslovakia. The next chapter will examine how Jan Švankmajer further interrogates the divisions between the living and the dead by repeatedly violating the integrity of the human body, conceived by Freud in 'The Uncanny' as the threat of castration. Tangentially, it will also look at the ways in which human form is imitated in Švankmajer's films, through dolls, puppets and other likenesses, and examine Švankmajer's preoccupation with eyes and their liberation.

**Chapter 4:**  
**Unquiet Biology –**  
**Stop Motion in the Films of Jan Švankmajer (Part 2)**

**Introduction**

Stop motion sequences about fleshly, anthropomorphic incarnations of inanimate matter and alienating objectifications of animate, organic subjectivities, all bizarre blurrings of boundaries of physicalities and ir/realities, provoke a curious spectrum of sensorial excitement, flashes of pleasure, horror, anxiety, experienced as fleeting possibilities, mixing, transforming into each other to surprise audiences and create an overall tickling effect that elicits (...) a complex corporeal feel of impending self-decomposition (Kérchy 2016, p.179).

Anna Kérchy's recently published book, *Alice in Transmedia Wonderland: Curiouser and Curiouser New Forms of a Children's Classic*, examines how Lewis Carroll's classic works *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871) have been reimagined in contemporary adaptations of the stories. Her comments regarding stop motion are made in reference to Jan Švankmajer's retelling of the tales in the late 1980s in his first feature-length film, *Alice* (1988). Kérchy captures the ways in which Švankmajer uses animation to interrogate and undermine the integrity of the human body, actively blurring distinctions between the organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate, the living and the dead. As František Dryje describes it in 'The Force of Imagination', 'Švankmajer carries film animation to paroxysm. He is capable of animating everything – mud, stones, animal tongues, leaves, clay, skeletons. Moreover, he animates living things – animals and people' (2008, p.152). All things have the potential to be transformed or reconfigured through stop motion in Svankmajer's films, and the divisions between object, animal and human are made less distinct in the process. Perceptions of true

sentience in living beings are frequently undermined, as they are made simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar by deconstructed or reconstructed forms. Body parts detach and move by themselves, and fragments of flesh and bone judder into life independent of their human or animal host. Moreover, inanimate objects often take on human or animal-like characteristics.

In the previous chapter it was argued that Švankmajer's deconstruction of objects through stop motion implied a kind of liberation and freedom, release from preservation and repression encapsulated in the containment of their form. At the same time, the chapter maintained, stop motion in his films invoked the uncanny by investing such animated sequences with connotations of loss of integrity, decay and death. Freedom is an essential ingredient in the work of Švankmajer, which explains his continuing allegiance to the Surrealist movement. 'It freed me', he states 'from fear of collectivity' (Sampsonia Way, 2012). The concept of freedom can have darker associations, however, precisely because it implies the eliding of structure and of boundaries. It can connote uncertainty through mutability, and the effacement of known structures and laws. Freedom, in short, can be decidedly uncanny.

This chapter looks in more detail at the ways in which the concept of freedom that Švankmajer applies to all things is made increasingly problematic and disturbing when applied to human and animal biology. It demonstrates that Švankmajer's desire for liberation of the body through displacement, dismemberment or substitution of its numerous parts suggests release, but also engenders uncanny fears associated with the erosion of identity, damage and the possibility of death. Further, it contends that a similar uncanny impression is created when inanimate objects are free to assume the guise of humans and animals, particularly when said objects appear charged with an innate tendency towards violence and destruction, enacted through the specific techniques associated with stop motion.



Critics writing on the subject of Jan Švankmajer's concerns with the body have tended to bring various forms of puppetry and animation together in their arguments. Meg Rickards, for instance, offers examples of Švankmajer's 'preoccupation with disintegration' from *Faust* (1994) that include a sequence where 'the head of Mephistopheles collapses into three lumps of bumbling clay' (2011). She then describes how 'an old man lugs around a severed human leg' (2011). The first example is a stop motion effect achieved through clay animation, the second a special make-up effect, but this distinction is not made in her article. Rickards identifies other moments from the film as stop motion, but analysis of its techniques is not the primary focus of her discussion, and this is similarly true of the other writers who have analysed Švankmajer's approach to the features of the body.

This chapter, like the previous one, will differentiate itself from existing research by focusing particularly on the way Jan Švankmajer uses techniques of stop motion animation to depict liberation from the biological status quo. It asserts that the way stop motion is constructed, and its uncanny elisions of the boundaries between movement and stillness, life and lifelessness, provide Švankmajer with the ideal medium to articulate his ideas regarding freedom of form. As before, affinities of Jan Švankmajer's work with that of Georges Bataille are given precedence over other forms of Surrealism, because of their shared desire for liberating through exploration of the darker facets of the universe: violence, destruction, decay and death. There are also identifiable coalescences regarding elements of the erotic between Bataille and Švankmajer's animations of unquiet biology, expressive of these darker themes.

## **Liminal bodies**

When inanimate objects take on the movements and mannerisms of a living being and appear sentient it can be a profoundly discomfiting sight, particularly when, as Freud observes, they exhibit an ‘excessive likeness’ to living beings (2003, p.141). In his article ‘The Uncanny Valley’, Masahiro Mori makes distinctions between the way a robot toy figure might resemble its living counterpart and how a prosthetic hand resembles a real one. In the first instance there is only a superficial imitation, and it is a comforting one: we can enjoy ‘a heightened sense of affinity’ (IEEE Spectrum, 2012). In the second example, there is an uncomfortable merging of the familiar and unfamiliar, as the hand appears warm-blooded but is cold to the touch. The effect is profoundly exacerbated by the addition of movement: as Mori puts it ‘our experience of eeriness intensifies’ (IEEE Spectrum, 2012). If this were applied to an entire artificial body, Mori writes ‘it would magnify the creepiness’ and ‘it would be like a horror story’ (IEEE Spectrum, 2012). Mori worked in Japan as a pioneer in the field of robotics, and is particularly concerned with how robots demonstrate uncanniness through excessive familiarity. His ideas suggest that freedom to imitate must have some limitations, and, as Lydia H. Liu writes ‘Mori repeatedly warns the scientific community about their narcissistic attachment to the self-image of the human and about the danger of falling into the Uncanny Valley’ (2011, p.246), the point at which resemblances become too unsettling.

In his use of animated dolls, mannequins, moulded figurines and numerous other objects that freely mimic actual appearance and behaviour through stop motion, Švankmajer engenders a similar sense of disquiet, although his is distinguished from Mori and heightened by the frequency with which the imitations are at the centre of violent and destructive acts. The cannibalistic doll who eats other toys in *Jabberwocky* is a prime example, as are the clay animations of figures that destroy each other’s faces in *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982). There is a sinister undercurrent to the ostentatious sadism, masochism, and sadomasochism with

which Švankmajer's animated mimics express their liberated status, inflicting injury upon both themselves and each other. The clay footballers in *Virile Games* (1988), for example, break and batter each other to pulp, emerging in the home of a spectator at the end of the match to inflict the same violence on him.

In *Conspirators of Pleasure* (1996) the effect is quite chilling, as various participants in perverse sex games are momentarily exchanged for stop motion mannequins, puppet animations who then appear to murder their partners, or are violently killed. But human likenesses can also be the victims of what purport to be passive-aggressive forms of harm. *Flora* (1989), for example, is a profoundly unsettling thirty second short in which a clay animated figure, simulating a woman, rots away whilst tied to a bed. Her face is clearly human-like, whilst her body appears to consist of vegetables, which rapidly decompose before our eyes, attracting maggots. The effect is achieved through shooting the perishable items a few frames at a time until they expire, and is reminiscent of Georges Bataille's thoughts on flowers, whose superficial exterior 'rots indecently in the sun' (2008, p.12) and leaves the roots to freely 'wallow in the ground' (2008, p13).

At times the likeness to human characters within the film is profoundly unnerving. The eponymous *Alice*, for instance, is exchanged several times for object animations of a doll; similarly, *Faust* (1994) is confronted by a demon who quickly grows from a clay animated baby into his mirror-image. The various clay models used to achieve the effect are shot and exchanged during cuts, so that the figure incrementally transforms into a chilling likeness of the character. The ability of an object to assume whatever shape it chooses induces a profound feeling of uncanniness, which is accentuated when it chooses you, becoming a manifestation of the doppelgänger, or double. As in Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo* films, Švankmajer's doubles are representations of vulnerability, a threat to individual identity, and what Freud calls an 'uncanny harbinger of death' (2003, p.142).

One of the most striking stop motion simulations of human biology in the work of Jan Švankmajer is the character of *Little Otik* (2000), a fragment of wood dug from the ground and carved into a vaguely human-like form. Disturbingly, Otik starts to assume the characteristics of an infant child. An insatiable appetite, however, leads to cannibalism and parenticide as it grows and is unable to control the urge to consume.

## **The Hungry Baby**

In the opening scenes of *Little Otik* the Horaks are depicted living happily together but preoccupied by the absence of children, to the extent that they experience bizarre waking fantasies: the selling of fish by a street vendor, for example, is reimagined by Mr Horak as the selling of babies in the same manner, dredged from a water butt and taken home in nets. The scenario illustrates not just the degree to which the couple have become obsessed with the desire for a family but also suggests that children have acquired the status of a commodity, an appendage to the consumer culture. It presages the appearance of the stop motion child-like figure of Otik, a form of puppet animation endowed by Jan Švankmajer with an insatiable, all-consuming appetite. Švankmajer has repeatedly articulated his disapproval with the evolution of consumerism, describing how he sees ‘the consumer society (as) the final stage in civilisation’ (Paszyk 2009, p.214), a chief characteristic of late 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism. Švankmajer’s critical view of the consumer culture is echoed in other films. In *Food* (1992), for instance, the bodies of people become vending machines for the person seated opposite them, an animated effect Švankmajer achieves through pixilation. When, in a later scene, the desire to consume has not been sated, even after the furniture and all of their clothing has been digested, one guest makes ready to eat the other, in a blackly comic yet disturbing display of cannibalism. His liberated objects often take on the

appearance of consumers, or are consumed themselves, an effect made more chilling when objects closely mimic the appearance of humans or animals, like the dolls in *Jabberwocky*.

The sense that some form of uncanny sorcery has enabled the liberation of objects, leaving them free to consume, has dark, primal associations. As Urszula Szulakowska has observed in her discussion of *Alice* for the book *Alchemy in Contemporary Art* 'Švankmajer's alchemy is cannibalistic' (2011, p.181). His animations inhabit universes where 'all is becoming in a perpetual black alchemical transmutation' and 'without any thought of obtaining the Philosopher's Stone' (2011, p.181), the mystical substance that was thought by alchemists and hermetics to turn base metal into gold. Švankmajer's stop motion creations seem unable to shake their base natures; they appear driven only by primal instincts, such as the desire for violence, and the urge to consume. Ostensibly made to move through the increments of a process that also seems powered by a primal animistic force, they are the embodiment of the drive towards death that is detectable in manifestations of uncanniness, the effect of which is made all the more disturbing when the animated objects in question resemble parts of the body, or when they begin to approximate human and animal features or mannerisms.

The violent and all-consuming *Little Otik* is a case in point. Whilst gardening at the couple's country cabin, Mr Horak stumbles upon an unusually large and oddly shaped root; in its features, he momentarily sees those of a human infant and shares this perception with his wife. She becomes obsessed by the resemblance and begins to treat the root like a baby, removing excessive twigs and offcuts, as if severing the umbilical cord on a natural child. She then dresses it in clothes which have presumably been bought and kept in anticipation of pregnancy. Mr Horak's complicit indulgence in these activities, and the couple's displacement of instinctual 'love' onto what would seem to be an inanimate object, can be understood and read sympathetically, to a certain extent. It equates to the affection a childless pair might lavish on a pet, for instance, although the object itself has a disconcerting

appearance, decidedly uncanny in its curious mimicry of human infancy. The circumstances of its discovery recall the depiction of life beneath the dirt to which Bataille displays a fondness, the baseness represented by ‘the impossible and fantastic vision of roots swarming under the surface of the soil, nauseating and naked like vermin’ (2008, p.13), or indeed, like a new-born child. It is interesting to note, too, that *Little Otik*’s birthplace, the site from where he was ‘uprooted’, is commonly regarded as the final resting place for the human corpse. Otik emerges from the same soil where the dead are buried. His status is made more uncanny by this conflation.

When Mr Horak returns to the cabin after a short absence, Otik has become an increasingly disturbing entity, acquiring a semblance of human movement. Through the uncanny skill of Švankmajer’s puppet animations that give articulation to the lifeless root, it is transmogrified into a living entity, with limbs – a word applicable to both animal and plant alike – splaying and kicking in the uncontrolled manner of a small infant. More disturbing still is the sight of what passes for a mouth, attaching the creature to Mrs Horakova’s breast and facilitating its ability to ‘feed’ from her. In these bizarre images, Švankmajer demonstrates how stop motion techniques can be utilised to mimic human sentience in a way that liberates the object, but which also becomes profoundly unsettling and uncanny. He also seems to hint at the possibility that this creature is the product of what Freud terms ‘the omnipotence of thoughts’ (2003, p.147), the ability to bring something into being by just thinking it. Freud associates this form of uncanniness with primal beliefs that remain within us in ‘residual traces that can still make themselves felt’ (2003, p.147). The implication is that the Horaks have brought ‘life’ to Otik, a primal being, through a primal invocation of the uncanny, the intensity of their desire to have a child.

Mr Horak’s instinctive response to the vision of this corruption of sentience mimicking a human baby breastfeeding is to take up an axe and, in his words ‘cut it to pieces’, to excise

the uncanny manifestation from their lives. The scene which follows is shot by Švankmajer in the style of a classic horror movie: rapid, dynamic editing; the threat of the axe cutting across the screen; and an overhead lamp that swings wildly above what Mr Horak refers to as ‘the monster’, flailing in stop motion on the kitchen table as Mrs Horakova struggles to protect it. The odd sense of excess inherent in the overly deliberate gesticulations of puppet animation, created by the way movements are isolated within their own set of stop motion frames, combines effectively with the lighting and editing in this sequence to create something truly disturbing. It illustrates why stop motion has so often been used in the horror genre to create monsters, the exaggerated movements of the creature matching those of the camera, the lights and the excesses of the cutting.

Where stop motion techniques are used in film there is a simultaneous impression of something recognisable and yet different in the increments of movement, which makes the animated subject appear both familiar and unfamiliar, and therefore uncanny. This is particularly disturbing when it is applied to an object that is deliberately intended to mimic sentient form, such as in this scene from Švankmajer’s *Little Otik*. That combination of familiar yet other is crucial in expressing visually the intentions of the animator, to reveal the hidden life of the object and to liberate form by eliding the divisions between the sentient and the inanimate. Abandoned temporarily by its surrogate mother, and the comforting nourishment of her breast, the creature reacts in the manner of a human infant, kicking and screaming on the table where Mrs Horakova has carefully placed it. A combination of deliberate, jerking movements provided by the increments of puppet animation, and Švankmajer’s decision to place a swinging lamp above the table, which throws Otik in and out of darkness, creates the impression that the most natural and idyllic scene, a mother breastfeeding her child, has been blurred with something altogether more horrific. The ultimate life-affirming and intimate act between parent and infant is twisted into something

altogether uncanny by Švankmajer's mise en scène, and by the liberation of objects he enacts through stop motion.

## **Liberating the Eye**

It later transpires that the ostensibly wooden Otik has acquired human organs and body parts, such as an eye, teeth and a tongue. Uncanny eyes and exaggerated emphases on looking are everywhere in Švankmajer's work, and stop motion techniques are frequently central to sequences where looking and eyes feature. Typically, the eye will be either the subject, rendered in stop motion, or the object being observed by someone clearly unsettled by what they are seeing. Extreme close ups of human eyes recur frequently in Švankmajer films wherever he uses live actors in states of anxiety and he will often face them squarely with the camera, indicative of the specific interest he has in this aspect of the performer. *Little Otik*, for instance, is replete with images of actor's eyes in extreme close-up, expressing emotions that range from puzzlement to disbelief and to horror, in response to moments of stop motion uncanniness.

The same treatment of eyes is evident in *Conspirators of Pleasure*, *Down to the Cellar* (1983), *Faust* and *Alice*, among many others, and when combined with moments of discomfiting stop motion animation the effect is striking. In his book *The Avant-Garde Feature Film: A Critical History* William Verrone notes how such an unexpected use of 'close-ups in combination with other actions is disarming, macabre, and an example of "brute reality" because they visually assault the senses (2011, p.184): they challenge the viewer. In reference to the way such close ups are inserted alongside stop motion sequences of tortured and torturing stop motion figures in *Conspirators of Pleasure*, Verrone adds 'the camera



zooms in frequently to heighten their connections – their conspiracies – and it directly forces us to view them in new ways’ (2011, 184).

The idea that Švankmajer is attempting to change our way of seeing something in *Conspirators of Pleasure* is an intriguing one and is linked to notions of freedom and liberation. The involvement of stop motion imagery is central to this idea: eyes in Švankmajer’s animated sequences are frequently shifted from their usual place above the nose and either repositioned or detached from the body completely. Often retaining their mobility, these eyes are given a reoriented perspective on the world. At times they are made to appear exaggerated, impossibly large or bulging, as if straining to be released. In some cases the eye is substituted for another object, or is reimagined as something other than an organ for observation. Again, these are ways of deconstructing and reconfiguring conventions of biology, and conventions of vision associated with the eye.

Significantly for this research, the attempts at reconfiguration also make the familiar appearance of the eye seem simultaneously unfamiliar, and therefore uncanny, and offer a particularly unsettling threat to the body’s integrity. By removing the eye from its natural home, exaggerating it, exchanging it or reconfiguring what it does, Švankmajer creates feelings of insecurity and speaks to a deep-rooted concern about harm inflicted on the eye within the human psyche. As Freud writes in relation to the threat of damaged eyes in the story of ‘The Sandman’ ‘one finds it understandable that so precious an organ as the eye should be guarded by (...) anxiety’ (2003, p.140). Aside from the notion that damage to the eye is commensurate with castration, Freud’s essay is filled with incidents, metaphors and inferences that suggest, in the words of Jan Švankmajer ‘fear has big eyes’ (The Independent, 2012), and that Freud shares this perspective. As Nicholas Royle observes, the phenomena ‘seems (at least for Freud) to involve a special emphasis on the visual, (...) on what is revealed to the eye’ (2003, p.108). Any threat to ‘so precious an organ’ as that depicted in the

stop motion animations of Jan Švankmajer is, as a result, perceived as supremely disturbing, and profoundly uncanny, associated with a threat to life.

It is these and other associated uncanny notions about eyes that Švankmajer makes visual through a variety of stop motion animation techniques in his films, including clay and puppet animation, object animation and pixilation. The uncanny instances of detached and displaced eyes in Švankmajer's work can assume a variety of forms. In *Virile Games*, for instance, the violence we see enacted on the football pitch through the television set of a spectator is brought to bear on the eye when the players burst into his house. The film culminates in a clay animated head being smashed to pulp, two glass eyes seeming as though they continue to blink, existing separately from the body. *Alice* features a myriad number of eyes that can imitate life independently of a body, none more so than those of the caterpillar, who is created by a combination of seemingly random autonomous animated objects, including two glass eyes that roll into its head. A jarful of eyes is depicted slithering through mud to join a drunken revel in *Lunacy* (2005), and several of them playfully mock ocular integrity by plopping themselves into position on the skulls of dead cattle. Equally disconcerting are the eyes which emerge from the formless lump that becomes a human-like figure in *Darkness Light Darkness* (1989): they mischievously appear attached to the ends of its fingers before being relocated back to the head.

One of the most disturbing examples of ocular displacement in Švankmajer's films occurs in *Little Otik*. Initially, the creature appears eyeless, much like a new-born child; it is only later, when it is admonished for trying to eat its surrogate mother's hair, indicative of its murderous hunger, that a single stop motion eye is revealed, staring out from the same orifice that had held the monster's teeth moments before, an effect made possible by incrementally shooting a glass eye a few frames at a time and gradually swivelling it into position. Otik is a supposedly inanimate object who engenders disquiet by eliding divisions between the living

and the dead by mimicking a child's biology, and through a liberation of form which is exemplified by the displaced eye.

Švankmajer makes intriguing use of overly animated and exaggerated eyes in the stop motion inserts for *Conspirators of Pleasure* (1996); their movements seem to indicate distress and horror but they can also be read as performative, expressive of the characters' complete absorption into the sadomasochistic games being enacted. Both notions suggest a desire for liberation. Puppet animations of the eye are used extensively for two characters in particular, each of whom create mannequins of the other and proceed to sexually torture them, and act out their 'murder'. In an unsettling blur between reality and fantasy, however, murder appears to have been committed upon the real characters as well as their dummies at the film's end, when the police are shown forensically investigating the deaths. The stop motion male mannequin, who is made to appear as if moving through puppet animation of the head, and pixilations of the body, is whipped repeatedly, made to crawl on all fours and ultimately drowned in a bucket. His eyes are shot frequently in extreme close up, their exaggerated appearance suggesting both actual and mock terror in what is ostensibly a lifeless mannequin. The female mannequin is bound to a chair by her partner, pelted with rocks and repeatedly strangled. Her puppet head is defined by eyes which are animated to seem as though they are registering shock and fear in reaction to the torture, although there is also an inference that this is performative. Indicative of the pressure inflicted on the neck, the mannequin's eyes appear to bulge outwards, in imitation of real eyes. Her final 'demise' occurs when a rock is dropped from height, spilling blood over the dummy's head from a filled balloon that has been strategically placed under her hat, and which smashes on impact. Significantly, the eyes are left bloodily dangling from what's left of her.

These sequences are extraordinary outcomes of a film that links Jan Švankmajer's notions of liberating form to the Marquis de Sade, a key figure for Surrealists, who sought absolute

individual freedom of expression without limits. The problem with such a lack of personal restraint is that it ignores the will of others, and of the laws of physics, specifically that action causes reaction. This is demonstrated through the uncanny blurring between reality and fantasy that occurs in the erotic encounters, where sadomasochistic pleasure is given extreme release. Seemingly ‘acted out’ as a sex game to the point of death, the film ends with the suggestion that real deaths have occurred as a consequence. Švankmajer’s exchanges of sentient being for animated mannequin liberate both object and sentient being, but that same spirit of liberation ends in violence, destruction and death. It is through the animation of eyes in particular, and their exaggerations, that this disturbing transgression of the borders between reality and fantasy, animate and inanimate, the living and the dead, is seen to occur.

## **Exchanging Looks**

Georges Bataille has often linked ocular imagery to eroticism, violence and death in his work. The most significant demonstration of his preoccupation with their connectedness is in *Story of the Eye*. Eyes are repeatedly made the target of extraordinary violence in the book, and they are also often equated with similar yet different objects, or are reconfigured, made to perform roles other than those for which they were designed. Their treatment resembles that meted out to eyes in Jan Švankmajer’s films through processes of stop motion, where they can be exchanged for something else or given radically different assignments. There are numerous examples of the former condition in *Dimensions of Dialogue*, where the eye is exchanged for a rolling apple, an empty can, a tape measure and a peanut. The imagery is clearly influenced by the work of Giuseppe Arcimboldo, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian painter, who created portraits using fruit, vegetables and a variety of other things in place of facial features. Švankmajer transforms Arcimboldo’s conceptions into visceral, violent scenes of

destruction. Through object animations, diametrically opposed heads in *Dimensions of Dialogue* come together in conflict, one consuming the other in a chain of primal savagery. The rolling apple eye, for instance, is set upon by a pair of scissors and mashed to pulp, the can smashed and broken in the pages of a book. The film is determinedly surreal in its use of analogy and substitution, and in a wider sense can be taken to represent the various forms of human interaction, which repeatedly end in violence and one-upmanship. Švankmajer was still subject to severe government censure at the time and his rebellious instincts against it are reflected in the way *Dimensions of Dialogue* shows us heads and eyes composed individually from each other that are repeatedly attacked by others and broken down. Ultimately the consuming heads create only a series of identical clay reproductions, with replicated eyes, suggesting that there is a desire among those in power to impose a monolithic view of the world, which would be particularly relevant to the conditions in Czechoslovakia at the time.

Substitution of the eye thereby becomes representative of seeking liberation against repression, both personal and political. The two are not mutually exclusive, as politically repressive dogma traditionally incorporates sinister elements of individual, psychological and spiritual control. Substitution is decidedly uncanny in that it undermines the eye's integrity to the body, but the inference is that such reimagining is necessary if the individual is to achieve freedom from both personal and political repression. The uncanny, Freud notes, occurs in 'something that has been repressed and now returns' (2003, p.147). Švankmajer's animations of ocular substitutes in *Dimensions of Dialogue* engender those uncanny feelings when they liberate the eye and but at the same time they attempt to show a way of releasing us from the repressive ties that bind, and which engender that sense of the uncanny.

In his examination of Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, Roland Barthes sees littered throughout the story a series of ocular substitutions. Like the examples in Švankmajer's *Dimensions of Dialogue* they possess an analogical similarity, but at the same time there is an

impression of incongruity created by the substitution. The eye and its surrogates thereby form an uncanny network in Bataille's unsettling tale, through a string of associative connections.

As Roland Barthes observes:

*Story of the Eye* is a metaphorical composition. In it a term, the Eye, is varied through a certain number of substitute objects standing in a strict relationship to it: they are similar (since they are all globular) and at the same time dissimilar (they are all called something different) (...) the Eye seems to be the matrix of a run of objects that are like different 'stations' of the ocular metaphor. The first variation is that of the eye and the egg. It is a double variation, affecting both form (oeil and oeuf share one sound and vary in the other) and content (although absolutely distinct, the two objects are globular and white) (2001, p.120/1).

Barthes sees how, after establishing this symbolic association, the uncanny use of language in

Bataille's narrative unlocks the door to further possibilities:

Once posited as constants, whiteness and roundness open the way to fresh metaphorical extensions: that of the saucer of milk, for example, used in Simone and the narrator's first piece of sex play. And when that whiteness assumes a pearly quality it invites a further development of the metaphor – one sanctioned by current French usage, which refers to the testicles of animals as 'eggs. This completes the sphere of metaphor within which the whole of *Story of the Eye* moves (2001, p.121).

The elisions in Bataille's writing concerning eyes facilitate a form of liberation through association, akin to the substitutions in Jan Švankmajer's stop motion animations for *Dimensions of Dialogue*. The eye is no longer defined and fixed but is free to be reimagined. At the same time, of course, this undermining of the eye's role creates anxiety by posing a threat to the identity and integrity of the individual, arousing uncanny sensations within the reader.

Roland Barthes' list of ocular substitutions in Bataille's *Story of the Eye* is completed by an object, the testicle, that makes a string of connections between eyes, the erotic and death. The coalescence between these three elements recalls the stop motion imagery and fetishisation in Švankmajer's *Conspirators of Pleasure*, and Freud's suggestion that there are links between ocular anxiety and castration is echoed in the way Bataille compares removed testicles to the

orb of an eye. The same chapter of Bataille's novel also contains an uncannily graphic description of ocular detachment, its title, 'Granero's Eye', unsettlingly hinting at what is to come. Granero is introduced to the story as the matador in a bullfight attended by the protagonists, and as a result of the fight he suffers the most appalling injury:

Granero was thrown back by the bull and wedged against the balustrade; the horns struck the balustrade three times at full speed; at the third blow, one horn plunged into the right eye and through the head. A shriek of unmeasured horror coincided with a brief orgasm for Simone, who was lifted up from the stone seat only to be flung back with a bleeding nose, under a blinding sun; men instantly rushed over to haul away Granero's body, the right eye dangling from the head (2001, p.53).

It is a grimly detailed account of an incident where the eye is again made the central focus for Bataille, and an indication of the degree to which Bataille is fixated on redefining and reconfiguring the eye: detaching it, replacing it, undermining its value as an organ for sight. The fact that the sun in the passage above is described as 'blinding' is not insignificant. It suggests that the eye is easily rendered useless, incapable of adequately serving the function for which it seems to have been designed. It could just as easily serve another.

Jan Švankmajer implies as much when he reassigns the role of the eye in films such as *Food*, where the familiar form of the human body is made suddenly strange by taking on the actions of a vending machine. Švankmajer uses a process of pixilation here, in which live actors pose whilst individual frames capture them, before moving to a different pose in the next frame. When edited together the actors' movements become like those of objects through stop motion: it gives their natural movement a sense of jerking and deliberateness. The process is ideal for the subject of *Food*, in which the organic body becomes mechanical. The eye is made an especially disturbing feature of the mechanisation, as each of the actors alternately becomes the feeder of the other and any food required is dispensed by pressing on the other person's eyeball. The eye is alternately presented as both functionally human, used to read the instructions for the 'machine', then in the same sequence it is transformed into a

vending component. Its purpose becomes blurred, between visual communicator and a button via which food is dispensed, and the impression is profoundly uncanny. It is also, of course, a form of liberation, revealing that the eye can have a hidden life enacted through different contexts.

Bataille makes graphic alternative use of an eyeball in *Story of the Eye*, as priest Don Aminado is set upon at the book's conclusion in Seville. Murdered during a sexual liaison, his eye is removed shortly thereafter, ripped from the socket by 'a hand reddened with blood' (2001, p.66), in the manner of Olympia's forcibly removed eyes in Hoffmann's tale of 'The Sandman'. His lover Simone then amuses herself by 'fondling the depth of her thighs and inserting this apparently fluid object' (2001, p.66). The eye is thus transformed into some form of pleasurable sexual device, its integrity and identity violated by an act that combines death and eroticism, as in Švankmajer's *Conspirators of Pleasure*.

## **Hungry Mouths**

As well as reconfigured eyes, teeth and tongues are a frequently recurring motif of Švankmajer's work. When objects take on the appearance of humans or animals in his films they often gain the features of the mouth in the process. The duelling heads in *Dimensions of Dialogue*, for instance, display very prominent tongues, which prove to be of no assistance at all in their efforts to communicate, although they aid considerably in their ability to consume their opposite number. Photographs hung as pictures on walls will often display a tongue, as if to offer a liberating and child-like insult to the viewer, in films such as *Jabberwocky* or *The Death of Stalinism in Bohemia* (1991). In the music video for the song 'Another Kind of Love' by Hugh Cornwell (1988), a pair of shoes is made animal-like by the adoption of tongues. The effect is made more unsettling by Švankmajer's use of actual animal tongues,



animated by incrementally moving them and shooting a few frames at a time to create the impression that they are lolloping or sticking out.

Teeth are often combined with the tongue to create an overall impression of uncanniness, inanimate objects taking on oral characteristics of living beings. The clay baby in *Faust* has a full set of teeth, for instance, which fit into its disturbingly skeletal head. A similar effect is achieved when a head bursts through a photo of Stalin in *The Death of Stalinism in Bohemia*, and chattering teeth are a repeated image throughout *Alice* in various stop motion creatures, such as the Caterpillar. All hint at Švankmajer's obsession with consumption and associations with greed and self-interest, which is exemplified by the figures in both *Dimensions of Dialogue* and *Food*, who go so far as to eat their companions. There is some indication of primal instincts in oral features, a savage past represented by the bearing of teeth and a lolloping tongue, like an uncivilised animal bearing down on its prey.

There are also associations between Švankmajer's preoccupation with the overt display of oral features, the erotic and childhood which can be linked to his own experiences regarding food and eating. In an interview for *The Independent* he describes how he 'was an introverted, over-eroticised child. I would refuse food and ended up in a wheelchair' (2012). In one sentence, Švankmajer conflates the consumption of food with becoming sexualised, a connection that Urszula Szulakowska makes in relation to Jan Švankmajer when she writes:

In Freudian psychoanalysis, the "oral stage" of infant development denotes the first psycho sexual stage where the mouth is the primary erogenous zone. Freud suggested that a trauma at this stage would lead to an associated neurosis in adulthood, producing an oral aggressive personality with a tendency to sadism (2016, p.12).

She suggests that, in films such as *Alice* or *Little Otik*, where young, pre-pubescent girls are confronted by animated objects baring tongues and teeth, there is an erotic frisson associated with aggressive consumption and the sadistic, and which connects to Švankmajer's own childhood experience. Jan Švankmajer has commented that 'the whole process of eating' can

be made ‘intensely erotic. Or it can be translated into a cannibalistic and aggressive act through which accumulated misanthropy can be released’ (2016, p.12). An uncanny elision occurs between erotic desire, hunger, violence inflicted on the body, and death, one that resembles the way Georges Bataille refers to the ‘taboo’ of cannibalism in which ‘the very prohibition attached to it is what arouses the desire’ (2006, p.72). By endowing his stop motion objects with what appear to be sentient teeth and tongues Jan Švankmajer invokes a threatening sense of the cannibalistic intertwined with the erotic.

## **Broken Bodies**

In describing the stop motion work of the Quay Brothers, who are the subject of chapter 5 in this thesis, Suzanne Buchan touches upon how Jan Švankmajer animates bits of flesh and bone in his films and the disturbing impression such animations create. She writes:

Real organs and flesh in animation have been used by other filmmakers, none perhaps more sanguinely than Švankmajer. Fresh or in various stages of decomposition, they draw attention to the power and paradox of animating body parts. With their direct relation to our own physical, embodied experience, these sanguine animated chunks have a jarring effect on us. The slab of liver, the smooth kidney, are not animated; they do not come to life. In spite of the undeniable, visible truth of their obvious deadness butchered from the body of an animal, the deadness of the material is enchanted via the animation around them (2011, p.115).

Several words and phrases stand out here, in relation to the uncanny. The ‘jarring effect’ that Buchan notes is highly significant, created by visions of detached slabs of flesh, organs and sections of bone oozing and scuttling across the floor, particularly when they are considered in the context of the body’s wholeness. They unsettle by signalling the possibility that the integrity of the body is not assured: it may fall apart at any moment.

The notion that these body parts are often decomposed or are in the process of decomposing is also important to highlight, and is directly related to the fears engendered by a threat to the

body's 'oneness'. Most apparent in ageing, and the onset of diseases such as cancer, the body can be seen to begin a process of disintegration, of decay, or collapse entirely. Decayed and decaying body parts of sentient beings are illustrative of the way our biological clock works to unsettle us, increments of time bringing a loss of youth, health, and bodily integrity. Stop motion animation is the ideal vehicle for embodying this uncanny process. It marks time through each deliberate graduation of its motion whilst all the while the stop lurks in the shadows, reminding us that the spectre of death is ever present.

Buchan describes how 'the deadness of the material is enchanted' via animation (2011, p.115) and this idea echoes the sentiments of Švankmajer expressed in a quotation from the magazine *Vertigo*, at the beginning of the previous chapter. His world view is one shared by 'children, tribes, surrealists and hermetics' (2007a). It has also been noted here before, however, that there is a decisively more sinister and cruel underpinning to this idea of enchantment in his work, which is associated with childhood play. In the work of Jan Švankmajer, enchantment is made apparent in sights such as body parts that take on a semblance of life, but more often than not those same body parts are imbued with a playfulness that frequently becomes disquieting.

There are numerous examples of the ways Švankmajer's animations convey these three key features to which Buchan refers, and which are pertinent to uncanny readings of his work: the threat to anatomical integrity, decomposition, and a sense of malevolent enchantment. It is possible, however, to expand on Buchan's characterisations by applying to each the notion of freedom and liberation from form that underpins the arguments in this chapter. Also, a greater focus can be given to her statement by concentrating on the way each aspect is made manifest through stop motion animation. The first aspect is perhaps best illustrated by films such as *Darkness, Light, Darkness*, in which various pieces of human anatomy enter a room and haphazardly form the semblance of a body. The fact that they are each able to survive

perfectly happily independent of the whole is unnerving, and in coming together to create what is recognisably a human being they suggest that we are merely the sum of a series of parts.

In an essay for Jayne Pilling's book *A Reader in Animation Studies* (1997), entitled 'Body consciousness in the films of Jan Švankmajer', Paul Wells suggests that the film is a sardonic view of the anxieties inherent in the growing process, and the uncanniness experienced in seeing parts of the body take on new characteristics. As Wells describes the animations in the film:

The first elements of the body to arrive in the room are the sensory apparatus: the eyes, the ears (arriving as a fluttering butterfly), the nose, the teeth and the tongue, the latter real dentures and flesh and finally, the hands and feet. The figure becomes self-conscious about its own creation, monitoring its own awkwardness and difficulty. Švankmajer implies that the figure might be read as a child slowly coming to terms with its sensual and physical faculties. The encroachment of puberty and adolescence is signalled by the specific gendering of the figure and the masculine imperatives which then seem to inform the process of 'growing up' (1997, p.182).

The complexities of adolescence are subsequently played out 'as the other parts of the body mobilise in the attempt to resist the entry of the genitals into the room' (1997, p.182). The punchline is revealed when the audience finds out 'just who or what is "banging" on the door' and the various body parts 'dowse in water what the viewer could assume was a previously erect penis, now entering the room in a forlorn and flaccid state' (1997, p.182). The effects of the film are created using clay animations and require that each body part be moved incrementally a few frames at a time. A playfulness is apparent in the tone of the film but, in addition to the analysis made by Wells, there is a darker, more sinister suggestion that the body is almost working against the notion of cohesion, and that its respective parts are simply mocking the idea of integrity. Their continuing resistance to the idea of joining and becoming trapped within a single form again, is palpable. The film is an uncanny reminder that our bodies are constructions, that might just as easily be deconstructed.

The rot of the body, and its liberation from limitations of the flesh, is often highlighted by Jan Švankmajer through animations of fragments of bone, and in depictions of animated skulls, such as the one lurking behind Stalin's picture in *The Death of Stalinism in Bohemia*. Like the animated tongues and teeth in his films, Švankmajer brings actual skeletons back to some semblance of 'life' through object animation, capturing their movements. *Alice* provides what is perhaps the most disturbing instance of this in Švankmajer's work, as an army of skeletal oddments lays siege to the child whilst she is trapped in a doll's house, and then violently attack her when she emerges. Finding herself cornered in a store cupboard, Alice notices a tray of eggs on the shelf; one egg cracks open to reveal a small skull which frantically dances around the others, an effect accomplished through painstaking object animations of the egg and its occupant by Švankmajer. Symbolic of the point where life begins, and a freedom that comes from escaping what is essentially a womb, the dancing skull in *Alice* is simultaneously representative of its end, and the collapse of a body into fragments. Like the stop motion figure of Otik, the egg creature is an uncanny embodiment of both birth and death at the same time.

Bones are similarly made to appear possessed of their own sentience in *Historia, Naturae, Suita* (1967). The film is broken into eight parts, each one focused on a different classification of animal life: fish, birds, and so on. At the end of the segment the respective animal group is depicted in skeletal form, and animated through stop motion sequences that depict the creatures moving in a manner synonymous with their living counterparts. The effect is both amusing, in a macabrely comic way, and somewhat discomfiting, since it turns representations of decomposed, dead body parts into living beings. The various sections are punctuated by the image of a mouth eating, indicative of the human position at the top of the food chain, endlessly consuming. The final shot of the film shows an animated skull doing the same. Roger Cardinal has suggested Švankmajer seems to be saying that 'what

encyclopaedias provide is not a system of definitions and representations of what is truly the case in the natural world, but a hair-raising menu of inexplicable alternatives without regularity and fixity' (2008, p.70). It is a perspective synonymous with the notion that Švankmajer's objects are free to assume any form they choose and that these bodily fragments can survive without attachment to its formality. Their imitations of the body's movements present an uncanny mockery of its integrity.

The playful yet sinister sense of enchantment in the skeletal choreography of *Alice* and *Historia, Naturae, Suita* is echoed in the way cuts of meat and fragments of bone interact and, at times, seem as though they are performing for the viewer in the films of Jan Švankmajer. In the minute-long short *Meat Love* (1989), for instance, object animation is used to make two raw steaks appear as if they are engaging in a brief courtship. The cuts have been shaped by Švankmajer in order to create a rudimentary resemblance to a body, with arms and legs. One fillet picks up a tablespoon and stands in front of it, as if admiring itself, then momentarily becomes self-conscious of its nakedness. The steaks come together and begin to dance, before falling into a bowl of seasoning. Their short romance is ended abruptly when they are picked up by a hand bearing a fork and dropped into a boiling pan. It is a brief moment of freedom for the pair that concludes in violence and death.

The skulls of dead cattle seem enchanted by the introduction of meat in Švankmajer's film *Lunacy* (2005). As a collection of bloodied organs and flesh oozes its way across the floor and into the skulls they spring into apparent 'life', ostensibly reawakened by the fragments of flesh that now inhabit them. Stop motion interpolations of disembodied tongues, flesh and organs that Jan Švankmajer intercuts at regular intervals throughout *Lunacy* provide acerbic, blackly comic commentary on events in the narrative, reflecting the various ways in which the characters' lives are regarded in the film. They also interrogate the relationship with liberation and freedom that Jan Švankmajer affirms over and over again is 'the only sense of

art' (AnOther, 2011). As Jonathan L. Owen warns, however, 'the darkest images of Švankmajer's films suggest that absolute liberation might only unleash a new despotism' (2013, p.192), and lead down an uncanny path towards total collapse, and to death.

## **Tongues Untied**

Jan Švankmajer's *Lunacy* is another adaptation of the work of Poe, and is based on two short stories. 'The System of Doctor Tarr & Professor Fether' centres upon a visit by Poe's narrator to 'a private Mad House' or asylum (2012, p.613), where he is invited to dine with what appear to be 'people of rank – certainly of high breeding' (2012, p.613). It is only at the story's end, when violence erupts, that the narrator learns the truth of the situation:

I shall never forget the emotions of wonder and horror with which I gazed, when, leaping through these windows, and down among us pêle-mêle, fighting, stamping, scratching, and howling, there rushed a perfect army of what I took to be Chimpanzees, Ourang-Outangs, or big black baboons of the Cape of Good Hope (2012, p.626).

These savage-looking creatures are in fact the staff of the asylum, kept imprisoned and tarred and feathered by the inmates, masquerading as the narrator's dining companions. There is a blurring of lines between appearance and reality in the events of the story, which is made startlingly clear at the conclusion. The revelations of the tale question our perceptions of madness and sanity, which Freud suggests can engender an 'uncanny effect' (2003, p.135).

'The Premature Burial', likewise, impresses upon the reader a sense of disorientation and elision of borders through its depiction of a condition that leaves those so afflicted with the appearance of someone dead whilst they are still very much alive. The rhetorical question that opens Chapter 1 of this thesis is taken from Poe's story, and it captures the sense in which the medical oddity of 'The Premature Burial' can be taken to represent the discombobulated state of the uncanny: 'the boundaries which divide Life from Death are at

best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?’ (2008, p.334). It is an idea central to the work of both Edgar Allan Poe and Jan Švankmajer. Both artists show a preoccupation with the uncanny blurring of distinctions concerning the nature of death, made more complex by Švankmajer’s obsession with liberating form.

Whilst the narrative of *Lunacy* is plainly influenced by the works of Poe, on the levels of incident and theme, there are also more profound connections to be uncovered in the philosophies they express through their respective choices of structure and technique. Švankmajer’s stop motion animations of tongues and cuts of meat, for instance, appear part of the *mise en scène* of the live-action narrative but at the same time they do not interact with its protagonists. They occupy what is ostensibly a liminal space situated between the worlds of the film and the viewer. Their role seems to be similar to that of the Shakespearean fool, providing a playfulness that momentarily frees the viewer from the drama of the text, but which at the same time gives clarity to the essence of the live action scenes.

The uncanniness the animated tongues embody is allowed full reign until the end of the film when they are forced back into an inanimate state. Packed into a freezer on a supermarket shelf, the slabs of meat are restrained under cellophane. They echo the conditions of the inmates at the conclusion, whose freedom of expression is quashed by the excessive discipline of the asylum’s reinstated head doctor. When they are not inhibited by such heavy-handed, sadistic and violent treatment the inmates are playful, if at times playfully malevolent. The same is true of the asylum in Poe’s story, where the inmates seem content in their anarchy. Both Poe and Švankmajer convey the idea that a little insanity is healthy, and that our fear of it leads to repression, which results in sensations associated with the uncanny. The mischievous animated flesh, which drinks beer, plays with brains and skulls and imitates puppets is a liminal entity positioned somewhere between the diegetic and non-diegetic universes, and its resistance to restraint, even when under cellophane, shows how



uncanniness will inevitably bleed through. This is given literal representation at one point when meat oozes between the bricks of a wall, acting like mortar.

In his review for *Sight & Sound* Michael Brooke suggests it is stop motion that prevents *Lunacy* from becoming ‘despairingly nihilistic’ (2007b, p.45). Švankmajer himself has described how it ‘introduces into the film a certain drastic but at the same time also ironic poetry’ (Hames 2008, p.136). The sinister enchantment of the film’s darkly comic stop motion elements offers liberation from form by breaking up the narrative with gallows humour, and pulling the viewer momentarily away from the nightmarish scenes. It is exactly this tendency that also makes the animations seem uncanny, however; they rebel against structure through their playfulness but they are also primal in their enacting of baseness, violence and cruelty, making apparent their urge to liberate, consume and destroy. Tongues drink beer, lumps of meat ooze out of a statue of Christ to perform in their own puppet theatre and brains insert themselves into empty skulls that then spring to apparent ‘life’. The dismembered body parts are also joined by animated hammers that smash bones to smithereens and by a chicken that is plucked, cooked and ripped to shreds seemingly by magic, an effect accomplished through object animation that is reminiscent of the raven in *The Fall of the House of Usher*. There are numerous instances where the animations of exposed flesh and bone in *Lunacy* are shown to suffer too, meat pressed against the bars of a cage or pecked at by stop motion birds. Such depictions reflect Jan Švankmajer’s interest in seeing the world as marked by cruelty, and affect the viewer by reminding them that they are vulnerable to harm.

## **Švankmajer the Butcher**

The slices of meat bloodily oozing beneath their cellophane packaging in *Lunacy* connote associations with butchery and the processes whereby meat is prepared for consumption, a particularly dark manifestation of containment. In its raw state, the meat remains difficult to dissociate from its origins as part of a living body, particularly when Švankmajer has made it appear ‘alive’ through stop motion. There is a distinctive blur between the nature of meat as a source of food, an object to be consumed, and its status as part of a sentient being, which is captured in the way it continues to appear alive after being separated from the animal.

Švankmajer repeatedly plays with this ambiguity between food the lifeless object and food as imbued with life in his stop motion animation. *Meat Love* and *Flora* both provide powerful illustrations of this idea. Acts of food consumption, preparation and butchery are repeatedly shown enacted on screen in Švankmajer’s films, often in conjunction with violence and the notion that the food in question might still be living. It captures the Švankmajerian sense of a cruel and often savage world, where divisions between life and death collapse in the face of primal desires such as hunger and consumption. The ultimate demonstration of this is in *Food*, where insatiable appetite is made visual through a series of pixilations. The film starts with ‘Breakfast’: a man is used as a vending machine, his anatomy reduced to a series of levers and pulleys that dispense a meal and the implements with which to eat it. Once breakfast is finished the consumer assumes the role of the machine. ‘Lunch’ depicts two diners who, frustrated by the lack of service in a restaurant, resort to eating everything around them. The sequence ends with an approaching knife and the threat of cannibalism. In the final sequence, ‘Dinner’ consists of various eaters consuming parts of their own bodies. There is no clear division here that marks food as an inanimate object to be ingested, separated from the living body. It is left decidedly uncanny.

Butchery of the animate is frequently enacted through the use of butchering tools in the films of Švankmajer, such as the mincer through which dolls are fed in *Jabberwocky* or the

meat hammer smashing skulls in *Lunacy*. These are explicit acts of violence made against objects that are representations of life and of the living body, and as such they are disturbing to watch. The use of recognisable butchery tools and techniques adds a further layer of discomfort because they are so clearly associated with destruction and dismemberment. An uncanny effect is generated when an act of butchery is inflicted on anything that questions our understanding of its sentience.

There are clear contextual associations in such scenes with the horrors of bloodshed and butchery through revolution and war that characterise Czech history throughout the first fifty years of Jan Švankmajer's life, including World War II, the invasion and Soviet occupancy from 1968, and the Velvet Revolution which brought an end to Communist rule in the late 1980s. However, Švankmajer himself has said 'because I realize that civilization does allow for the creation or existence of something as sick as Fascism or Stalinism, then the entire civilization itself is very ill, something is wrong' (Animation World, 1997). The statement is entirely in keeping with his notion that it is freedom which is 'the only theme' (Sampsonia Way, 2012), although this too has its darker, uncanny side.

Georges Bataille often uses butchering metaphors to refer to the ways in which change is affected on humanity and human society. His short essay 'The Jesuve', for instance, vividly depicts a symbolic axe blade that 'would sink into this imaginary skull, like the cleavers of butchers that split in two, in a violent blow struck on the block, the sickening heads of skinned rabbits' (2008, p.78). Dismemberment references are made to similarly striking effect. In the essay 'Sacrifices' he describes catastrophe as 'a skeleton armed with a scythe; a glacial and gleaming skeleton, to whose teeth adhere the lips of a severed head' (2008, p.134). And in his piece entitled 'The Accomplice' he includes the following arresting passage:

I am haunted by the image of the Chinese executioner from my photograph, working at cutting off the victim's leg at the knee: the victim is tied to a

stake, eyes turned up, head thrown back, grimacing lips revealing teeth. The blade entering into the flesh of the knee: who would accept that so great a horror faithfully expresses “what you are”, your nature laid bare? (2011, p.33).

Bataille looks to such uncanny imagery for something more brutally truthful, a frank representation of human ‘nature laid bare’. In the excess and horror of these stark depictions lie what Bataille describes as signs ‘to remind us constantly that death, the rupture of the discontinuous individualities to which we cleave in terror, stands there before us more real than life itself’ (2006, p.19). Death is always lurking in the shadows, waiting to return us to the continuity that lies outside of mortality, and we cling to our lives in fear of the alternative. It is interesting that Bataille should use the word ‘cleave’ in the context of death, a term that might refer to the way a butcher splits open a carcass.

In Bataille’s fiction the ‘reality’ that death represents assumes a variety of graphic forms, a number of them associated with butchery. For example, in *L'Abbé C*, published in 1950, he captures for the reader the scene as he enters a butcher’s shop where ‘two freshly slaughtered lambs, hanging by their feet, were still slowly leaking blood; on the chopping block were some brains and large bones whose pearly protuberances had an aggressive sort of nudity’ (2012a, p.52). Although appearing to be a room full of dead things, Bataille’s words imbue the carcasses and anatomical fragments with a semblance of life: the bodies continue to leak blood, and the brains and bones are marked by ‘an aggressive sort of nudity’, a word typically reserved for human skin. The image bears some resemblance to the stop motion animation at the beginning of *Lunacy*, where a pig is slit open by an unseen hand: life is applied to the victims of butchery in both cases. *Blue of Noon*, from 1957, offers an equally unpalatable description when the narrator wakes up feeling nauseous: ‘everything was alien to me. I had shrivelled up, once and for all. I thought of the bubbles of blood that form over the hole a butcher opens in a pig’s throat’ (2012b, p.82). In this case he associates himself with a slaughtered pig, a discomfitingly uncanny metaphor.

One additional aspect of interest that is apparent in some depictions of butchered, living/dead bodies from the work of both Georges Bataille and Jan Švankmajer is a hint of the erotic, of the sexual. Bataille refers to the ‘aggressive nudity’ of the body parts in the butcher’s shop as if they were imbued with a living sexuality. And in *Blue of Noon* he describes a scene in which the body of a woman dancing provocatively begins to blur with that of a wax doll she is holding, from the perspective of the narrator. ‘The wax was soft’ he writes ‘it had the suppleness and coolness of flesh’ (2012b, p.35). The human-like doll falls over when they try to stand it up as ‘the feet had been cut off’ (2012b, p.35). More disturbing still is the moment when the narrator recalls ‘I found a knife on a table and cut off a slice of pink calf’ (2012b, p.35). The suggestions of dismemberment, and connotations between the woman’s body and that of the doll’s, create a sense of uncanniness, which is made more complex by the introduction of a sexual element. In the courtship of Švankmajer’s *Meat Love* there is a similar inference of the erotic blending with the butchered body when the two fillets dance cheek to cheek, before briefly engaging in an intimate tussle in a bowl of seasoning. It is a scenario reimagined for *Lunacy* when two tongues copulate on a surgeon’s table. The complexities of the relationship between the uncanny, the horrific, eroticism and death are all played out in such a sequence.

There are also elements associated with liberation, the deconstruction and erosion of biological form in order to effect release from repression, and it is this problematic equation – absolute freedom on one side, and the disintegration of structure on the other – that is at the centre of Jan Švankmajer’s work in stop motion animation. Like stop motion itself, Švankmajer interrogates an uncanny blur between the surge of life and its violent end, his objects playfully engaged in paroxysms of movement but also charged with primal and child-like instincts towards consumption and the enacting of violence, ultimately leading to destruction and death.

## **Chapter 5:**

### **Solitude, Darkness & the Living Dead –**

### **Stop Motion in the Films of the Quay Brothers**

#### **Introduction**

“We have lived too long under the terror of the matchless perfection of the Demiurge”, my father said. “For too long the perfection of his creation has paralyzed our own creative instinct. We don’t wish to compete with him. We have no ambition to emulate him. We wish to be creators in our own, lower sphere; we want to have the privilege of creation... The Demiurge was in love with consummate, superb, and complicated materials; we shall give priority to trash. We are simply entranced and enchanted by the cheapness, shabbiness, and inferiority of material... This is the proof of our love for matter as such... (We) love its creaking, its resistance, its clumsiness. We like to see behind each gesture, behind each move, its inertia, its heavy effort, its bearlike awkwardness” (Schulz 1977, pp 60-2).

In the beginning there was darkness and cold flame and lingering thunder... and then the motion ceased and the delicate flitting of articulated limbs, which handed the me to me, lifted lightly up, relinquished that me to pincer hands, offered it to flat mouths in a rim of sparks, disappeared, and the it that was myself lay still inert, though capable now of its own motion yet in full awareness that my time had not come, and in this numb incline the final flow of current, breathless last rites, a quivering kiss tautened the me... But perhaps all that was a dream. Of waking I know nothing (Lem 1992, pp.181-2).

These quotations are taken from works that the Quay Brothers have chosen to adapt into stop motion animated shorts at vastly different points in their forty-year career, and they encapsulate many of the themes and preoccupations that return again and again throughout the twin artists’ body of films. The first excerpt is a description by Bruno Schulz, from *Street of Crocodiles*, recounting how his shopkeeper father perceived the tailor’s dummy, yet it could so easily be interpreted as describing the stop motion animator who seeks to express the uncanniness of the medium. A form of creation, stop motion emulates movement but also permits glimpses of the cracks, by virtue of the frame by frame increments through which this

apparent kineticism is articulated. It facilitates endowment of a semblance of 'life' whilst opening up a space to reveal the 'creaking' and 'resistance' that Schulz describes, which is laid bare in the graduated movement, the baseness, of the animation. Its exposure provokes a sense of fear and uncanniness, opening a gateway to the possibility of the stop, of the 'inertia' as Schulz puts it, and a world that exists beyond the motion of life, defined by darkness, decay and death.

The excerpt from Stanislaw Lem's short story 'The Mask' starts from the point where an inanimate object is ostensibly invested with life and the ability to move but momentarily remains still, uncertain of itself. Crucially, the wider world in which this 'creation' lies, caught between inertia and motion, is vaguely defined, and is characterised by darkness. Whilst the incremental mechanics of motion are detailed in Lem's story the exact nature of the space in which it occurs is frequently left obscure, as this passage demonstrates. Through the subjective narration of Lem the protagonist can describe the 'delicate flitting of articulated limbs' and 'pincer hands' but there is little contextualisation of the wider surroundings. The character remembers specific aspects of the experience but they remain somewhat removed from the larger context of the space they inhabit, which creates an impression of isolation, and of solitude.

This approach is reflected in the stop-motion universes of the Quay Brothers. As in the passage by Lem, oftentimes it is as though the figures they animate are moving through a dark dream, or nightmare, separated from reality, in which the minutiae are given clarity whilst the wider world is left obscure and remote. In the films of the Quays there is a persistent desire to see the universe in this distinctly uncanny manner, where human substitutes and other objects are brought out of lifelessness by some semblance of sentient 'being' through the articulations of stop motion, with a tightly focused camera providing an exaggerated scrutiny of the process by which they are articulated. Greater emphasis is given

by sealing these living dead creatures in some strange universe with familiar features, the world outside rendered distant, dark and obscure through isolating lighting techniques and carefully constructed sets. Attention is constantly drawn to the intricacies of the stop motion figures, their baseness magnified as a consequence.

The Quay Brothers will often open up a figure in some way to show us the workings inside, or will draw discomfitingly, uncannily close with the camera to expose the rawness in its fundament. It is as if they want the spectator to consider the incremental nature of their own sentience, and the raw, base and primal aspects of the self that are hidden in darkness and obscurity within, connotative of inertia, death and decay. The sense of suffocation that is translated to the screen in their films by enclosed sets, frequently shrouded in darkness and shadow, is complemented by the penetrating camera. The emphasis is on deliberately drawing the viewer inward, to look directly at what is often concealed. As Freud argues, that which has been hidden finds a way 'into the open' (2003, p.132); it bleeds through the cracks to the surface, as manifestations of the uncanny. The studied proximity, which is characteristic of the Quay Brothers' films, also has the effect of isolating a character within their environment, individuating them from their surroundings. It forces them to be solitary. These two features of stop motion in the Quays' films, the depiction of solitude and probing of darkness, are crucial in understanding the unsettling effect of their work. The scrutinising of their stop motion creations, every movement accentuated through close up shots that linger in tight focus, throw attention on the gritty, unvarnished aspects of them, signalling the presence of decay and the shadow of death in what purports to be living, like the stop motion shots of intracorporeal tentacles spreading and darkening the frame in Shinya Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo* series.

Existing scholarship of the Quay Brothers' films has concentrated its attention largely on their adaptation of *The Street of Crocodiles*, released in 1986, and their first live action



feature, *Institute Benjamenta* (1995) (Atkinson, 1994; Hammond, 1995; Verrone, 2013). Susanne Buchan has conducted a more extensive study of their work, and touches upon aspects of the uncanny detectable in the architecture of their sets, as well as forms related to the presence of automata, and the omnipotence of thoughts. Her aim, however, is to write something wide-ranging that encompasses 'literary interpretations; mise-en-scène relationships between parameters of set design, architecture, and puppet design; camera, lenses, and lighting; montage; and music, sound, and noise' (2011, p.xxv). This chapter will offer a different approach by incorporating elements of these studies, but focusing more specifically on the aspect of stop motion animation in the films of the Quay Brothers. It draws upon examples taken from various stages in their career, including both *Street of Crocodiles* and *Institute Benjamenta* but also one of their earliest completed films, *Nocturna Artificialia* (1979) and one of their most recent, *Maska* (2010), as well as a number of others. It argues that the representation of solitude and interrogation of darkness are key metaphors in the films of the Quay Brothers, which are linked to the mechanics of stop motion, to notions associated with decay and death, and to the uncanny. The inference is that both the formal and thematic rendering of solitude and darkness are crucial in understanding the unsettling nature of their work.

As chapter 1 of this thesis explains, solitude and darkness are two elements of the uncanny that Freud directly mentions twice but only briefly in his essay on the subject; importantly, however, he describes them both as being charged with anxiety from infancy, 'something that most of us never wholly overcome' (2003, p.159). Their presence can be intuited elsewhere in his study, where Freud touches on the uncanniness of 'being buried alive', for instance. He relates such a fear to memories of 'living in the womb' (2003, p.150), a period in which borders are elided, when a human is neither completely living nor without life. They are also apparent in the story of the ghostly wooden crocodiles that seem to elide sentient divisions

and ‘come to life in the dark’ (2003, p.151), as well as in the notion that ‘the fear of going blind’, of being suddenly plunged into darkness, is uncanny (2003, p.139). There is a context of the dark, inferred in ‘The Uncanny’ and elsewhere in Freud’s work, that is related to the obscure, to the unknown, and to the primal and childhood fears from which uncanniness originates, associated with the collapse of the border with death, which stillness and the processes of decay interrogate. Importantly, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) Freud suggests that darkness, despite being profoundly uncanny, is the defining characteristic of the route to exploring the dream phenomenon, and therefore learning more about the human experience. As he puts it:

the easy and comfortable part of our journey lies behind us. Hitherto, all the paths that we have followed have led, if I mistake not, to light, to explanation, and to full understanding; but from the moment when we seek to penetrate more deeply into the psychic processes in dreaming, all paths lead into darkness (1997, p.355).

Both Stanislaw Lem and Bruno Schulz articulate notions of a universe in which solitude and associations with darkness are often perceptible, and this is made visual through the stop motion adaptations of their work by the Quay Brothers, whose films are routinely marked by the same preoccupations. The eye of their camera fixates on detail and incrementality, communicated through puppet and object animations of stop motion, whilst blurring the boundaries of the environment. It isolates the apparently ‘living’ figures and draws attention to the base and crude aspects of them which are most indicative of the darkness associated with the unsettling presence of death, and in which signs of decay are perceptible. Like Schulz’s father, The Quays also display a preference for using ‘trash’ in their work; minor, overlooked objects that are marked and dented, or scraps of discarded materials often form a key component of their animation. They bring a ‘lived-in’ dimension to the films which reminds the viewer that this is a universe appropriated by the rot of mortality, as opposed to refinement and artifice.

Such images echo the thoughts of Georges Bataille, who writes in ‘The Language of Flowers’ of the way ‘the ignoble and sticky roots wallow in the ground, loving rottenness just as leaves love light’ (2008, p.13). His comments on ‘Dust’ for the *Encyclopaedia Acephalica* celebrate the dark universe of ‘obsessions, phantoms, spectres that the decayed odour of old dust nourishes and intoxicates’ (1995, p.43). The predilection he expresses for base substances, associated with death and decay, such as blood, excrement and dirt, extends to encompass the erotic. In *Story of the Eye*, for instance, his narrator states:

I did not care for what is known as “pleasures of the flesh” because they really are insipid; I cared only for what is classified as “dirty”. On the other hand, I was not even satisfied with the usual debauchery, because the only thing it dirties is debauchery itself, while, in some way or another, anything sublime and perfectly pure is left intact by it. My kind of debauchery soils not only my body and my thoughts, but also anything I may conceive in its course, that is to say, the vast starry universe, which merely serves as a backdrop (2001, p.42)

The stop motion animation of the Quay Brothers aligns itself with Bataille’s fondness for detritus, decay and death through its blur of the boundaries between kineticism and inertia, and through its intense focus on the visible joins in the things it animates, often accompanied by flashes of erotic frisson. The animations of the Quay Brothers capture the desire they express in an interview with André Habib, ‘to make a world that is seen through a dirty pane of glass’ (2002), a microcosmic view marked by baseness and rot in which perspective is determined by an intimate frame of observation. The following examination of their films will explore these ideas further, identifying how their work seeks to make visual the preoccupations with solitude, darkness and a living death that are so clearly articulated in the work of Stanislaw Lem and Bruno Schulz, and which are decidedly uncanny. It will look at the ways in which the Quays have interpreted these ideas through adaptation of the authors’ works into stop motion, as well as in numerous other animated examples from their canon of films.

## **A World Apart: *Nocturna Artificialia* (1979)**

Made in 1979, *Nocturna Artificialia: Those Who Desire Without End* is a 20 minute film that appears to take place during some eternal night. It may in fact be the same night experienced *ad infinitum*, an uncanny expression of repetition. The film focuses on a solitary figure, whose movements are created through the stop motion technique of puppet animation. Alone in his shabby room he views trams passing from various windows and is depicted floating above the rails; reaching out, he tries to touch the roof of a tram as it passes. There is a definite sense of ambiguity between what is real and imagined in the journeys he takes on board the trams, an uncertainty that is expressed through the nocturnal setting, and the absence of any other people. At the film's end the figure appears to wake once again in his room, as if from a dream.

From the opening sequence, the film establishes a location which is removed from the world around it by the presence of what purports to be night. Darkness encloses the deceptively simple set that composes the interior and exterior of the man's room, with the crudely designed stop motion tram moving in and out of pools of light as it traverses its universe on rails that disappear into the gloom only to reappear somewhere else, in endless cycles of repetition. The tram's movements are generated through painstaking increments of object animation, shot as a series of stills that give the illusion of progression forwards along the tracks. As the only passenger, our protagonist appears isolated even in what purports to be the outside world, forever going through the same motions. The suggestion is of a profound sense of claustrophobia, an irrational fear associated with the impression that there is no escape and that one is closed in. It is similar to the way Anthony Vidler describes the uncanny as depicted in the prison designs of Giovanni Battista Piranesi, a world of 'silence, solitude, of internal confinement and suffocation, that mental space where temporality and

spatiality collapse' (1992, p.39). It has the effect of focusing attention on what is visible within the mise en scène, magnifying incremental movements within the frame, as well as those crucial moments of stillness, where nothing is seen to move. Both stop and motion are given additional emphasis.

The selection of a tram as the vehicle by which the protagonist is transported is significant. It is a vehicle whose journey is very specifically guided: wheels turn on visible rails beneath and the exposed electrical current conducts the tram on lines above. There is uncertainty as to who is controlling the vehicle, and in the absence of a driver its movements might seem almost to be psychically determined by the film's protagonist. The suggestion is that we are seeing the exposed workings of his mind operating the repetitive meanderings of the tram, indicative of the phenomenon of the 'omnipotence of thoughts' that Freud describes in 'The Uncanny' (2003, p.147). The rhythms of the tram capture a sense of circularity and endlessness as they glide in and out of frame, blurring the ability to distinguish one moment from another, and this forms a vital part of the way the Quay Brothers seek to create an unsettling impression of perpetual solitude. The reiterations of movement suggest an aimlessness, or soullessness, and are a recurring theme in the work of the Quays. They echo Freud's thoughts on this particular aspect of the uncanny as they move in and out of darkness. Referring to the phenomenon as 'repetition of the same thing', Freud describes vividly how 'one may be groping around in the dark in an unfamiliar room, searching for the door or the light-switch and repeatedly colliding with the same piece of furniture' (2003, p.144). In *Nocturna Artificialia* that repetitive action is represented through the traversal of darkness by a figure on a tram, isolated and purposely wandering, then coming back to the same point over and over again.

A seemingly minor element of stop motion animation in the Quays' films is often made more significant through their technique of minimalising all other movement so that attention

is drawn to it. For example, in *Nocturna Artificialia* a stray piece of wind-strewn litter is caught by a pool of light and made to appear as if it is blowing across the empty set. The Quay Brothers often make apparently small and unremarkable objects metaphorically much larger in their films through deemphasis of everything else in the frame, and it is in keeping with the impression they give in *Nocturna Artificialia* of a world where signs of decay are visible once you look closer. As the character of the shopkeeper father seems to suggest in his praise of detritus and the unvarnished object from *The Street of Crocodiles*, they bring with them an enhanced sense of the artifice of cohesion belying the baseness and rot underneath, a concept that is echoed in the use of the word ‘artificialia’ in the film’s title.

There is almost a ghostly quality about the actions of the figure in *Nocturna Artificialia*, and the way that they are endlessly replayed. Alone and always travelling at night, the protagonist could be taken for an undead spirit, haunting the gloomy room and empty trams. Freud has stated that ‘anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts’ can be considered ‘the most potent’ source for uncanny manifestations (2003, p.148) and there is certainly a disturbing quality to the way the character imagines that he is floating above the tramrails and moves through the film as if unseen. At the end of the film, however, there is a scene which has the potential to alter this perception. It begins with an abrupt cut, from a shot of the protagonist looking up at passing tramlines, to one in his room where he falls from a chair. The sudden transition is surprising, as it does not adhere to the gentler rhythms of the editing that characterise the rest of the film. It also reemphasises the figure’s sense of isolation and solitude: he falls to the floor and no one picks him up.

A strange harmonisation between the man and the tram is implied in the next shot, where a close up shows a stop motion hand rhythmically stroking a tramrail. A wide shot then reveals that the floor in the room – not clearly visible before - is composed of cobbled brickwork, like a street, and there are rails running through the centre of it. The light inside darkens, and

shadows of an animated tram can be seen passing across the face and body of the man as he lies on the floor. The implication is of some odd symbiosis here, or a dream of one. The Quays' animations strongly suggest that the man and the tram be perceived as one and the same, which gives some clarity to the absence of a driver. The uncanny inference is that the man is somehow one with the machine, an impression that increases as the stop motion movements of his body begin to synchronise with those of the tram.

In Freudian terms, the symbiotic relationship the animation depicts can be associated with the uncanniness of 'waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata', as well as 'the uncanny effect produced by epileptic fits and the manifestations of insanity, because these arouse in the onlooker vague notions of automatic – mechanical – processes that may lie hidden behind the familiar image of a living person' (2003, p.135). It is an illustration analogous to Tom Gunning's observation that the technology and machinery of modernity has intensified feelings of uncanniness. 'Much of what we think of as uncanny', Gunning states 'entails the emergence of a modern world' (2008, p.68). Referring to the Quay Brothers specifically, Gunning adds that their films 'represent less the attenuation of the uncanny than its colonization of the realistic world', calling into question 'the stability of the ordinary world, as if modern experience routinely anticipates the onslaught of the unfamiliar' (2008, p.86).

The stability of the character in *Nocturna Artificialia* is thrown into doubt by his unsettling behaviour, and the Quays' animation in the sequence disturbs because it raises uncertainty regarding his sentience and also hints at a break with psychological norms, raising issues concerning how a fractured mind can lead to isolation, loneliness, and solitude, and the elision of the borders between reality and fantasy. In the book *Lacan on Madness: Madness, Yes You Can't*, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Guy Dana refers to 'the radical solitude of psychosis', and how 'it can never be shared' (2015, p.47). The notion has links with Freud's

thoughts concerning those dark and obscure aspects of the human psyche that characterise the latter stages of his journey to understanding in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. To put it in his words, ‘all paths lead into darkness’, and that is certainly reflected in *Nocturna Artificialia*.

### **Spit & Sawdust: *Street of Crocodiles* (1986)**

In the original short story of *The Street of Crocodiles* Bruno Schulz describes an area of his city which is only vaguely sketched in on maps:

‘the Street of Crocodiles shone with the empty whiteness that usually marks polar regions or unexplored countries of which almost nothing is known. The lines of only a few streets were marked in black and their names given in simple, unadorned lettering, different from the noble script of the other captions. The cartographer must have been loath to include that district in the city and his reservations found expression in the typographical treatment’ (1977, p.100).

Even in this brief description there are already indications of why Schulz’s tale would’ve attracted the attention of the Quay Brothers. Like the darkened sets of *Nocturna Artificialia* the Street of Crocodiles is characterised by minimalism and isolation in terms of where it is located. Although it forms part of the city, Schulz – via the cartographer – has attributed to it a segregated status, marked out from the areas that surround it. As the short story progresses it becomes clear that it is the minutiae of detail within the location that is important to Schulz; likewise, the film adaptation by the Quays concentrates its focus on the smaller elements – the particularities of objects and their increments of stop motion. In his essay on *Street of Crocodiles* for the book *Adaptation & the Avant-Garde* William Verrone writes of how the white space on Schulz’s map ‘becomes manifest, becomes imagined through the experimental adaptation process the Quays undertake’ (2013, p.160), the world they create ‘a subconscious, otherworldly place, where mechanical, unexplained actions dominate and dark, shadowy figures loom’ (2013, p.159). The manifestation of stop motion creations in the



Quays' adaptation echoes the process by which uncanniness occurs, emerging from obscurity but remaining difficult to define, eliding divisions between the animate and the inanimate, the living and the dead.

In seeking to express the notion of a universe separated from the everyday through visual means, the Quay Brothers open their film with a live action sequence in which an elderly man enters what purports to be an old theatre, crosses the stage and disappears behind a curtain. The film cuts to a backstage view, and the camera draws in closer to a metallic contraption in the centre of the screen which has a viewfinder attached, like some form of kinoscope. An intertitle reads 'Prelude – The Wooden Esophagus'. The man approaches the contraption, peers into its viewfinder and then spits through a hole inside. Seeming to be reddened, or possibly bloodstained, blades start to turn within the hole and a whole series of connected machinery components begin to grind into some semblance of 'life'. Inside the machine, a tall stop motion puppet figure struggles to free himself from a string by which he seems tied to the mechanism. The elderly man takes a pair of scissors and cuts the string. Now freed, the figure will serve as a tour guide for the film, escorting the viewer on a journey through the claustrophobic confines of the world within.

There is a definite aura of something visceral and base about the tone of the Quays' *Street of Crocodiles*, synonymous with the use of spitting and blood to create a simulation of life. As the film progresses there are more disturbing moments where the body is depicted as deconstructed or decaying, represented in stop motion techniques associated with puppet and object animation. Raising a heavy glass pane, the tall figure sees a long pair of gloves hanging, suspended, like detached arms; a pocket watch is attacked by stop motion nails and opens to reveal that it has red and fleshy insides, like some form of monstrous clockwork hybrid; and whilst exploring the narrow, darkened streets the solitary, animated guide passes windows full of bones and bits of flesh floating in tanks. Writing in *Adaptation & the Avant-*

*Garde* William Verrone describes the setting for the film's 'final macabre scene', a large shop where 'the walls and shelves are covered with needles, strings, screws, jars, and drawings of human body parts (skulls, jaws, and genitalia)' (2013, p.156). The tall figure enters the shop and is set upon by a group of doll-like assistants, made animate through puppetry techniques of stop motion; they have empty, eyeless heads and brandish needles. Removing his head, they replace it with one similar to their own, stuffed with cotton wool; another assistant, meanwhile, produces a large, bloody piece of flesh and proceeds to wrap it in paper, tacking it like someone tailoring a suit.

The deconstruction and display of the body, reduced to just fluids – blood, spittle – and its other various components – arms, bones, organs, the head and eyes – can be understood as characteristic of the Quays' ongoing endeavour to reveal its inner workings and expose its essential baseness, an act analogous to the work of Georges Bataille. For Bataille, the body is not an integral, impervious entity but is a series of parts – the big toe, the eye, the ear, the mouth – and decomposition and disintegration of the body into rot and dust marks a point of convergence between 'horror and fascination' for him (2006, p.56). He writes that 'repugnance and horror are the mainsprings of my desire' in regards to decay and death (2006, p.59). The Quay Brothers uncannily expose the body's components to greater scrutiny in their animations, which literally pull apart the human form and offer it up for closer examination. Peeling back the layers and stripping away the impression of bodily integrity, the Quay Brothers encourage confrontation of those dark, uncanny fears related to dismemberment, damaged bodies, animism, and the living corpse.

Stop motion, crucially, is at the core of this process, from the moment at which spittle brings supposed 'life' to the restless hands of the protagonist, a purportedly sentient presence inside what is described unsettlingly by the titles as a 'wooden esophagus'. The esophagus is, in biological terms, a body part that links the throat to the stomach, the gut, and the viscera.

The increments of stop motion can thus be understood as primal terrors, visceral fragments of a decaying body. Grubby, half-formed mannequins with peeling paint, kinetic nails and screws burrowing into clockwork flesh and dolls with excavated, eyeless heads sticking pins into bloodied organs bring to mind thoughts of violent animism, death and decay, the blurring of machine and human, and the compulsion to repeat. An onslaught of disquieting stop motion images emerges from darkness as each dusty room and window is artificially illuminated: significantly, there is no natural light in this hidden, hermetic world. The Quays' *Street of Crocodiles* is, in essence, a journey into the realms of the uncanny where its various manifestations are put on display in dusty storefronts, made visible through 'dirty panes of glass'.

*Street of Crocodiles* is replete with Frankenstein-like scraps of worn metal and material, welded or stitched together and seemingly moving of their own volition, as well as ageing oddments displayed alongside each other within rusting cases, coated in dust and grime and sporadically springing into life, like a used toy winding down. The strangeness of these things recalls the words of the tailor from Schulz, regarding his desire for bringing a semblance of life to the lifeless and discarded. Both Schulz and the Quays seek to tease out the secreted, uncanny life of objects marked by the dark shadows of baseness, death and decay. As Suzanne Buchan notes in *Into a Metaphysical Playroom* the Quays endeavoured to recreate the philosophy of Schulz's tailor on film through bits of things 'sifted from histories of art, gathered during secondhand shop forages, materials frayed by age, alienated from their original purposes, and reconfigured to make new meanings' (2011, p.66). These are not aesthetically pristine objects, echoing what the tailor describes as 'the matchless perfection of the Demiurge' (1977, p.61). The Quays' dilapidated, dusty, hybridised animations crawl out from darkened corners, rattling and squeaking, barely held together by loose stitching, string and caked-on dirt. In short, they fulfil the tailor's criteria for the essence of matter when you

scrape beneath the surface, with ‘its creaking, its resistance, its clumsiness’ (1977, p.62), as well as the elision of the border between life, represented by motion, and inertia, embodied in the stop.

## **Sex, Death & the City**

There is often an element of the erotic about the way objects are caressed, penetrated, stripped or voyeuristically peeped at in the Quays’ *Street of Crocodiles* but it is rife too with the stench of decay, and of death. There is an anticlimactic pointlessness to such stop motion activity in the film; these are acts of fruitlessness, and frustration. Tyrus Miller observes that ‘the urban landscape that the Quays depict is charged with a disquieting combination of stillness and agitation, suggesting a restless erotic desire hidden behind the banal inexpressiveness of its walls, windows and doors’ (2003, p.83). Schulz’s narrator describes something similar upon visits to the area when he recalls:

‘In an atmosphere of excessive facility, every whim flies high, a passing excitement swells into an empty parasitic growth; a light gray vegetation of fluffy weeds, of colourless poppies sprouts forth, made from a weightless fabric of nightmares and hashish. Over the whole area there floats the lazy licentious smell of sin, and the houses, the shops, the people seem sometimes no more than a shiver on its feverish body, the gooseflesh of its febrile dreams. Nowhere as much as there do we feel threatened by possibilities, shaken by the nearness of fulfilment, pale and faint with the delightful rigidity of realisation. And that is as far as it goes’ (1977, p.109).

He is more specific when he talks of the tailor’s shop, where the innocent and bland façade gives way to ‘an antique shop with a collection of highly questionable books and private editions... not even in our dreams had we anticipated such depths of corruption, such varieties of licentiousness’ (1977, 103). The salesman ‘lay on one of the many sofas which stood between the bookshelves, wearing a pair of deeply cut silk pyjamas’ whilst the salesgirls ‘demonstrated to one another the poses and postures of the drawings on the book

jackets' (1977, 104). In seeking unsuccessfully to find the shop again once he has left, however, Schulz resignedly concludes 'we shall get involved in misunderstandings until all our fever and excitement have spent themselves in unnecessary effort, in futile pursuit' (1977, 110).

Tyrus Miller describes the erotic, yet ultimately disappointing undertone in the tailor's shop as it is rendered in stop motion by the Quay Brothers. 'The basic narrative of this scene' he writes 'is that the (tall figure), wandering about and peering in the shop windows of the district, is drawn into the tailor's shop by the blandishment of its tailor and his glowing-eyed, automaton assistants' (2003, p.96). There is a sudden frenzy of activity focused on the figure's head and body, then 'at the height of this activity, the tempo suddenly slackens, and the (tall figure) is allowed to view anatomical drawings. He contemplates suggestively testicle-like pieces of meat with pins jutting out of them and caresses pieces of fur, cloth-covered shapes, and limply hanging, calves-leather gloves' (2003, p.96). There is an erotic frisson that is allowed to momentarily linger before:

in what appears to be the climax of this obscene spectacle (...) he is led to peer back out into the Street of Crocodiles... The scene ends with the tailor's assistants having spent their charge of temporary life, with the camera sweeping past them, as their single arm gyrates erratically, like a burned-out machine (2003, p.96).

The brevity of the erotic encounter, like that in Schulz's story, has passed and the tall man is left once again to wander in solitude.

The notion of stumbling upon a secreted, erotically-tinged place and finding yourself drawn back to it repeatedly is not dissimilar to that detailed by Freud in a passage on repetition and déjà vu from 'The Uncanny'. The wording is cautious, but the inferences are present. 'Strolling one hot summer afternoon through the empty and to me unfamiliar streets of a small Italian town', Freud recalls:

I found myself in a district about whose character I could not long remain in doubt. Only heavily made-up women were to be seen at the windows of the

little houses, and I hastily left the narrow street at the next turning (2003, p. 144).

A distinct strain of uncanniness takes over Freud, however, and compels him to return again and again:

After wandering about for some time without asking the way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence began to attract attention. Once more I hurried away, only to return there again by a different route. I was now seized by a feeling that I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad to find my way back to the piazza that I had recently left and refrain from any further voyages of discovery (2003, p.144).

What Freud experiences in these uncanny moments of apparent ‘helplessness’ and ‘unintentional return’ (2003, p.144) are fleeting encounters with the erotic, which are visually expressed by the Quays through the stop motion judder of their compulsive repetitions. They echo the uncanny sense in which Freud’s erotic encounter takes on a darker register, associated with the death drive, the urge that can overtake the body and mind in pursuit of sexual pleasure. The idea is synonymous with the view of Georges Bataille, that ‘when the fever of sex seizes us (...) we recklessly draw on our strength and sometimes in the violence of passion we squander considerable resources to no real purpose’. As a consequence, ‘anything that suggests erotic excess always implies disorder’ (2006, p.170). What Freud and Bataille both describe is an experience of uncanniness defined by blind compulsion. The ‘disorder’ Bataille describes is mirrored in Freud’s sense of disorientation, and the wandering figure of the tall man through the Quay Brothers’ labyrinthine sets.

There is an accompanying sense in these experiences of individual experience that isolates, synonymous with solitude. Bataille describes how the desire to ‘squander our resources’ makes us ‘want to feel as remote from the world where thrift is the rule as we can’ (2006, p.170), which can be likened to the way Freud is removed from anywhere he recognises and led down ‘empty’ and ‘unfamiliar’ streets to his erotic encounter. The ill-defined streets resemble those on Schulz’s map. In the film of the Quays, the seemingly aimless tread of the

tall figure's stop motion movements carry him from one window to the next, where he is repeatedly drawn to peep in at the various animated titillations within before moving on to another similar yet different attraction.

The predilection his narrator expresses for what Schulz refers to as 'immersion in that shallow mud' (1977, p.101) is echoed in Bataille's thoughts from his article 'The Lugubrious Game' in which he answers the façade of intellectual pretension with 'a black rage and even an incontestable bestiality; it is impossible to get worked up other than as a pig who rummages in manure and mud uprooting everything with his snout – and whose repugnant voracity is unstoppable' (2008, p.24). Mired in dirt and filth, and ripe with decay, the mannequins and other mechanical/organic hybrids that interact in the Quays' *Street of Crocodiles* splutter into apparent life through stop motion, but in many cases it is mere simulation, performance and futile gesture. Screws unwind themselves from one place and bury themselves in another; various machines stretch, snap and crack in rhythm with each other but produce nothing as a result; and a hand reaches up to rub a mannequin's bare breast, which evinces no reaction. Even the frenzy of the tailor's shop ends with all energies expended, the tailor's arm merely stuck on repeat. The film concludes with this modified quote from Schulz's story.

In that city of cheap human material, no instincts can flourish, no dark and unusual passions can be aroused. The Street of Crocodiles was a concession of our city to modernity and metropolitan corruption... the misfortune of that area is that nothing ever succeeds there, nothing can ever reach a definite conclusion... Obviously, we were unable to afford anything better than a cardboard imitation, a photo-montage cut out from last year's mouldering newspapers (1977, pp 109-10).

It summarises the sense of a living death that lingers throughout, a haunting echo of the conditions under which Schulz lived and prematurely died, shot by a Nazi bullet.

### **Visualising Fracture: *In Absentia* (2000)**

Commissioned by the BBC as a means of bringing the work of various composers to life on the screen, *In Absentia* is structured more experimentally than most the majority of the Quay Brothers' work, using loose visual association to link one apparent location with another. The film is a meditation on madness, inspired by the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen. It begins with random objects that are depicted in a landscape lit by flashes, which transitions into a moonlit sky and a cut to the exterior of a large building. Flaring from a window within the building, light is a link through the next cut, to a pair of feet swinging from a balcony in what appear to be medical braces. Darkness fills the screen, then a traversing light accompanies a cut to a closer shot of an open window, seen from below. A series of disjointed, almost subliminal shots momentarily disorientate: the landscape, the window, the window from a different angle, back to the previous angle, now to a closer shot. In semi-darkness the swinging feet become visible again, dangling from an external ledge, and the open window swings wildly in stop motion as a series of small spherical objects roll upwards across the wall. They are animated with no human assistance, and seemingly act in defiance of gravity. The two effects are created through object animation, shot on the floor of a set and then edited into the film at a 90-degree angle.

The impression given is that we have stepped into a sane person's nightmare, or an insane person's waking experience, where shadowy, juddering images seem vaguely linked and yet remain somewhat obscure. There is detail but without incremental coordination or a wider context. In the manner of the uncanny, objects seem familiar, whilst the way in which they are presented belies that certainty. The introduction of stop motion reinforces this unsettling impression by distorting any sense of direction and spatial awareness, and through its depiction of objects imbued with sudden, violent motion, apparently unaided by human intervention. The animistic life given to lifeless objects continues once the film cuts inside, to



what presumably is the room behind the flailing window. A pencil propels itself from the floor to a table, for instance; object animation techniques make it seem as if the pencil is dancing frenziedly for a few seconds; it then flies into a waiting hand.

There is a conventional way of depicting the space and sequence of events in this universe in filmic terms, through shots that bring us gradually into the room; but *In Absentia* has been perversely restructured into fragments that appear sewn together and more subjective. The effect is profoundly disquieting, a Frankensteinian patchwork of discomfiting sights and sounds which given an essential flourish of unsettling strangeness by elements of stop motion animation. Their movements are suggestive of uncanniness expressed through ‘the omnipotence of thoughts’ (2003, p.147), drawing us inside an individual’s disturbed perspective of the universe. The Quay Brothers break down the familiar and render it unfamiliar in *In Absentia*, a process not unlike that which is experienced when the uncanny overwhelms us. It is a perspective to which stop motion seems ideally suited, as its adherence to temporal and spatial conventions is somewhat undermined by its own idiosyncrasies. Built out of fragmented stills, actions frozen in time and space which are stitched together in order to create a series of movements and an illusion of ‘life’, stop motion is a medium where the joins remain visible. The movements are recognisable enough as sequential but the assembly doesn’t hide their origins, the flaws in their design. Stop motion reflects the words of Bruno Schulz’s tailor, who is actively seeking out the ‘heavy effort’ and ‘bearlike awkwardness’ that lies behind ‘each gesture’ (Schulz 1977, p.62) and reveals the inertia behind the semblance of life.

It is not until the conclusion of *In Absentia* that it is revealed who the hand holding the pencil belongs to, or is intended to represent. The figure is a representation of the long-term asylum inmate Emma Hauck, who wrote incessantly to her husband, asking for him to come and release her: ‘Herzensschatzi komm (sweetheart come)’ reads the closing intertitle. The

letters she wrote, however, were incomprehensible, uncannily repetitious and overlaid so that each line became a meaningless scrawl. The compulsively written and overwritten letters are a physical manifestation of her mental state, her sense of frustration and the solitude that characterises her madness, which the Quay Brothers physicalize using stop motion. Like the frenzied objects in *Street of Crocodiles*, embodying a sense of living death, the pencil that flies from the floor and spins before landing in her hand is the realisation of Emma's living death, isolated by the prison of her own mind and expressing herself repeatedly, fruitlessly, through endless repetition. It is as if the pencil has taken on an unstable sentience of its own, one that externalises the internal fracture. It becomes an uncanny object through its animism, as the tool by which 'manifestations of insanity' become visual (2003, p.135) and by its participation in a pattern of compulsive repetition, which, like *Street of Crocodiles*, is tinged with eroticism.

The animated pencil is an object seemingly driven by that which Freud describes in 'The Uncanny' as being 'strong enough to override the pleasure principle and lend a demonic character to certain aspects of mental life' (2003, p.145), a characteristic that connects the uncanny to the death drive. Appearing to concur with Freud's notion, the Quays literalise the figure of a demon in the film through stop motion, accomplished through a form of puppet animation. The demonic likeness is depicted through colour footage, which is in striking contrast to the monochrome of the film. It suggests that the madness has an intensity not matched by reality, a subjective depiction of her psychological state. The actions of the creature are closely mimicked by the actress portraying Emma, suggestive of a malevolent control being enacted from within. It recalls the ostensible manipulation of the individual by another that we see demonstrated in stop motion by the protagonists in Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo*, a manifestation of the double or *doppelgänger* which Freud identifies as producing an uncanny effect through more than just a similarity in appearance. 'This relationship', he writes 'is

intensified by the spontaneous transmission of mental processes from one of these persons to the other so that the one becomes co-owner of the other's knowledge, emotions and experience' (2003, p.142). Moreover, Freud continues:

'a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other's self for his own. The self may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged. Finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing, the repetition of the same facial features, the same characters, the same destinies, the same misdeeds, even the same names' (2003, p.142).

Through stop motion the discarded filings from pencils are seemingly reconverted by the demon back into usable tips, as if feeding the insanity. The inmate is then shown to be planting pencil tips in filings on her window sill, in the expectation that new pencils will grow from them, in the manner of flowers. Both the inmate and the demon brush away tips which have attached themselves to their extremities, the human hand mimicking the stop motion hoof. As Freud describes it, it is as if there is transmission of thought from one to the other, visualised through replications of movement. There is also the more disturbing implication that the living being, reduced to mimicry and frenzied repetition, is being substituted, or subsumed, by the other. The human figure is being taken over by their shadow, an inference that engenders uncanny sensations through its associations with the loss of identity, with darkness, and death.

There is a certain significance to the fact that the Quay Brothers are, in fact, twins, essentially 'doubles' for each other. Duplication, mirroring and the transmission of thoughts from one character to another are recurring features in their films and have an additional resonance when considered in the context of each director's own uncanny identification with their fraternal twin. It also enhances the sense of discomfort and fear engendered by solitude in their films, a situation that could only occur in reality if their close relationship fractured, or one of them died before the other, which is, of course, a likely scenario.

An overwhelming impression of hopelessness is perceptible in the endless circularity and loss of spatial orientation in *In Absentia*. The incessantness of actions repeated over and over is reinforced by the use of suffocating close ups, their madness emphasised by magnification and the way in which, in terms of the filmic medium, a series of extreme close ups that is given no wider context can make something familiar appear altogether more strange. Stop motion is the ideal form of film-making to employ here, as it is best picked out by the camera through the close up, its uniqueness of movement recognisably similar yet different to the eye. When increments of stop motion are incorporated into a series of close up shots they can further destabilise and stress the uncanny indications of what we are seeing by emphasising the ways in which reality is being broken apart, as in the frenzied, repetitious movements of the pencil or the curious doubling between the demon and the human. In this respect the filmmakers are also showing us what we have taken for granted as ‘natural’, by rendering the conventions of narrative filmmaking uncanny.

The extreme close up shows only pieces of the whole, and for *In Absentia* this fracturing of space fits perfectly with the subject. It allows the Quays to emphasise fragments of a damaged and broken person which echo their broken mental state, the proximity permitting greater scrutiny, and allowing the darkness and insanity within to be seen more clearly. Its privileging viewpoint gives access to aspects of the self that are indicative of the path towards disintegration, and of the collapse into deconstruction, decay and death. In other words, it draws us closer to the death drive, in which Freud perceives the desire to become less individuated, and return to darkness. Stop motion emphasises this aspect of the extreme close up through the inherently fractured nature of its animation, and by the way in which it can focus attention on one small movement at a time: the brushing of filings by a devil’s hoof, which is then duplicated, is a prime example. Scrutinised closely, it reveals both the inertia

and kineticism, the simultaneous presence of both life and death, that are characteristic of those fears that invoke uncanniness.

### **Isle of the Uncanny: *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes* (2005)**

The second feature-length work by the Quay Brothers, *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes* has a deceptively complex plot that can be more simply understood as a perverse, and distinctly uncanny, love triangle, infused with notions of solitude, of darkness and the embodiment of living death. It opens dramatically, as opera singer Malvina is mysteriously taken ill on the eve of her wedding to Adolfo and apparently dies during a performance. Spirited away to an island owned by the eccentric Dr Emmanuel Droz, Malvina is kept in a state of suspended animation whilst the obsessed Droz experiments with ways of somehow bringing the two of them together. To that end Droz has created a series of seven automata, the last of which is not revealed until the conclusion of the film. Until then all machines and instrumentation require maintenance, and Droz employs the services of a piano tuner to assist him with this, Felisberto. It is not insignificant that Felisberto bears a striking similarity to Adolfo, Malvina's fiancé, and Droz makes full use of the mirroring between the two characters in the final performance. Restaging the moment of Malvina's tragic collapse from behind glass as the ultimate display of his skill with automata, Droz fatally underestimates the growing passion between Felisberto and Malvina, both of whom he has incorporated into the show as living exhibits. When Malvina spies Adolfo in the viewing audience she whispers his name, and it is enough to trigger the titular earthquake, which kills Droz among others. At the conclusion of the film Droz's assistant is seen rowing away from what remains of the island, whilst in a haunting image Felisberto and Malvina are left to endlessly repeat their first meeting on a clifftop, as if now trapped in the role of automata.

As is the case in other works by the Quay Brothers, the asynchronous quality of stop motion animation, the inherent characteristic of being slightly out of step with live action sequences, augments the impression that this is a dark and unstable world. It also increases the sense of isolation and solitude displayed by various characters within the film. From the opening scenes of *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes* the Quays appear to be placing us in a slightly altered state. The impression given by the mise en scène of the film, its rhythms and actions, is one of the dreamlike, or the nightmare: it is almost as if the film is taking place in a reality that is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, with its own sense of sequential logic. It recalls the words of Stanislaw Lem in 'The Mask': action follows action, but there is an unsettling air of estrangement about the protagonist and a nebulousness to their surroundings that destabilises and engenders an aura of danger and uncertainty: 'perhaps all that was a dream. Of waking I know nothing' (1992, p.182). The Quays reinforce the disturbing effect by repeatedly creating microcosms of solitude, darkness and death in *Piano Tuner...*: the theatre stage for the traumatic primal scene at the beginning of the film; Droz's island; the catatonic state of Malvina; the various automata viewed from behind glass that conclude with the restaged performance of Malvina's collapse; and the final haunting images of Felisberto and Malvina trapped in a never-ending cycle of repetition. Stop motion is a perfect embellishment of these devices in the narrative as it appears to be operating at its own rhythms, in a universe slightly removed from the norm; and it simulates real motion, rather than duplicating it, creating an illusion of life.

The enhancement it provides is demonstrated in a scene where Felisberto chances upon an axeman whilst walking through woodland with Droz's assistant, Assumpta. The Quays intercut shots of Felisberto talking to the assistant with those of a mannequin woodcutter, articulated by puppet animation, who turns his head and reacts as if seeing or hearing the couple. Their discussion reveals to the audience that the gardeners and land-workers on the

island are all, in fact, psychiatric patients undergoing therapy, a revelation which suddenly affects our perceptions of the woodcutter. Substituted for a real actor the figure might have appeared uncanny through gestures and lighting; in stop motion the figure's odd gesticulations enhance the feeling of disquiet. He is not just a madman with an axe: he is a stop motion madman with an axe. The woodcutter is a nightmarish, unsettling embodiment of those aspects of the uncanny which concern 'manifestations of insanity' (from Freud 2003, p.135) and that are triggered by a strangeness of movement; by rendering him in stop motion the Quays exacerbate this impression of discomfiting strangeness.

More disconcerting still are the woodcutter's later appearances at several key points in the narrative, and how they function to further disorientate. In the process of experimenting with a mechanical diorama, for what will be the climactic performance, Dr Droz casually turns a cog and a column collapses on the set; as it does lightning flashes externally, accompanied by crashing thunder. The film quickly cuts first to a shot of Felisberto, who falls to the floor, and then to the woodcutter, who similarly stumbles, holding his head. Felisberto raises his head and looks off screen, ostensibly to the axeman, who has momentarily slipped and hacked at his own leg. It pours with blood, which fills a nearby pool. Running to view the automata, Felisberto peers inside and is blinded for a moment by a sudden burst of light from the bloody pool. It is a strange sequence of events, where numerous manifestations of the uncanny are transmitted using stop motion. The synchronous reactions of both Felisberto and the woodcutter are indicative of some form of control by Droz: it is as if they respond remotely to him. This is, perhaps, a further example of the 'omnipotence of thoughts' that Freud identifies (2003, p.147). It recalls the relationship between the salaryman and the fetishist in the *Tetsuo* films of Tsukamoto, and between the demon and the inmate from the Quays' *In Absentia*, intimating manipulation of one party by another.

The simultaneous responses between Felisberto and the woodsman also appear to suggest some form of dark symbiosis between the pair, a doubling that Freud describes as linked with ‘mirror-images, shadows, guardian spirits, the doctrine of the soul and the fear of death’ (2003, p.142). The impression is intensified moments later when Felisberto peers through the automaton window and is blinded; in that moment, as he narrates to us in a voice-over ‘I saw my face, my reflection, then for a second everything seemed to sag’. There is an inference that some form of dark magic has been instilled within the automaton, within the blood of the stop motion figure, and it has taken possession of Felisberto, the first step in making him part of the machinery. The narrative suggests that his image, and voice, are being ‘stolen’ and integrated with the mechanics of the automata, and when Droz suddenly appears at Felisberto’s side he intimates as much, saying ‘did you not think me capable?’

The puppet figure of the woodcutter plays a crucial, and disturbing, role in the sequence as a victim of Droz’s manipulations, as a symbiotic mimic, and as an apparent conduit for Felisberto’s transformation into one of the doctor’s automated puppets, a creature of the living dead. The figure is central to the ways in which the Quays elide the divisions between human and other, life and death, the real and the imagined, the world inside the machine and outside it, in *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes*. In one sequence the figure is shot in a way that suggests he is interacting, in what purports to be the ‘reality’ of Droz’s island; in the next he is confined to the microcosm within the microcosm, the world of the automata. The figure transcends boundaries between one place and another, one state of sentience and another. How does a mechanical doll, one might ask, exsanguinate blood when their leg is cut?

The woodcutter is key to our understanding the blurring, internal logic of *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes*. This is a dark, nightmarish universe where temporal and spatial laws have been elided, in which stop motion figures bleed, and automata decay and are replaced by humans. The flailing stop motion woodcutter, who hacks at his own leg, is a representation of



the living dead dualism: he is both flesh and machine, a 'real' figure, operating with the supposed laws of the diegesis, and an imagined doll, an independent being and a controlled puppet. Sadly, when seen later in the film, he merely jerks his head and body backwards and forwards repeatedly. He has become stuck in a cycle of eternal, uncanny repetition, like the inmate from *In Absentia*, the composite hybrids in *Street of Crocodiles* and the solitary tram passenger in *Nocturna Artificialia*. Finding the image unbearable to look at, Felisberto reaches underneath the automaton and switches it off, effectively switching off the woodcutter's 'life support'. Felisberto himself is afforded no such mercy at the end of the film when he is shown to be stuck in a similar loop with Malvina, demonstrating a further prophetic link between Felisberto and the woodcutter.

### **Spirituos and fiery spume: *Maska* (2010)**

One of the first images we see in *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes* is a stop motion sequence of a pair of frog's legs wriggling in a glass chamber, created by puppet animation. Detached from the animal's body, the legs are placed next to a dying flower which – through some form of alchemy by Dr Droz – sprouts roots and attaches itself to the legs, thus creating a profoundly disturbing animistic hybrid. Picking up the flower, Droz places it in his top pocket as if it were the same as any other corsage. The opening of *Maska* presents us with a similar scenario, depicting a creature who is peered at through glass and, as the narration by the subject relates, 'it' is gradually transformed into a woman: 'a fragile string broke within me and 'I', a 'she' now, felt the violent rush of gender'. Object animation depicts a drill of some kind being inserted between the creature's legs and artificially inserting the appropriate sexual organs.

In similar vein to the adaptation of Poe's 'Fall of the House of Usher' by Jan Švankmajer, the Quay Brothers depart only slightly from Vladislav Lem's source text for *Maska* in the passages they elect to include. Like Švankmajer, they retain a faithfulness to the source whilst bringing their own sensibilities to bear on it, as they transform Lem's words into stop motion animation. Arguably, the adaptation or appropriation of a story, its themes and characters from one text to another, is an uncanny process in itself, linked to the notion of the living dead in the form of what Jay Clayton calls 'a ghost effect' whereby 'each text is haunted by the others' (1992, p.54). The intertextual relationship is not discussed directly by Freud in 'The Uncanny' but he is plainly subject to its ghostly effects: his reinterpretation of 'The Sandman', for instance, is an abridgement that is selective, focusing specifically on the uncanniness that chooses to foreground in his essay. He struggles to contain it, however, a situation exacerbated by the fact that he is aware of an earlier interpretation by Ernst Jentsch. At first he seeks to distance himself from Jentsch's conclusions but they come back to haunt him several times, until he relents and accepts them.

The uncanniness of intertextuality is a process intensified when the subject matter itself is so unsettling and, this thesis argues, it is more disturbing still when the reinvocation is enacted through processes of stop motion, which add a 'ghost effect' of their own through the elision of boundaries between stasis and movement, symbolic of life and death. The collapse of boundaries that occurs in the work of the Quay Brothers, as demonstrated in the 'flower' from *Piano Tuner* or the protagonist in *Maska*, demonstrate this most clearly: in both cases, what is ostensibly hidden belies that which is clearly visible. The opening of *Maska* appears to depict the creation of something or someone that is ostensibly a woman; it is revealed later, in fact, to be some form of automated insect underneath. Like the unsettling amalgamation of flower and frog in their previous film the Quays reveal both faces of the animated object to the audience; they infuse the objects with uncanniness by bringing what is hidden out 'into

the open' (Freud 2003, p.132), and making visible the darkness they embody. In Milton's *Paradise Lost* Satan articulates a similar desire to acknowledge the primal and base elements hidden from view when he says:

Which of us who beholds the bright surface  
Of this ethereal mould whereon we stand,  
This continent of spacious heaven adorned  
With plant, fruit, flower ambrosial, gems and gold,  
Whose eye so superficially surveys  
These things, as not to mind from whence they grow  
Deep underground, materials dark and crude,  
Of spirituous and fiery spume (2008, p.155)

In Georges Bataille's 'The Language of Flowers', he sets about deconstructing our perceptions of the flower by, first, commenting on how we look to the wrong part of the plant regarding associations with love and the sexual act. 'If the sign of love', he writes 'is displaced from the pistil and stamens to the surrounding petals, it is because the human mind is accustomed to making such a displacement with regard to people' (2008, p.11). In other words, heads are turned too easily by the ostensibly attractive; higher value is erroneously placed on the externalised display, the aesthetically pleasing. Bataille then linguistically pulls the flower apart completely and instead draws attention back to the root, which thrives 'under the surface of the soil, nauseating and naked like vermin' (2008, p.13), a more honest depiction of a plant's sentience.

Darkness and its associations with the base, the primal, decay and death offers alternative visions to Bataille, as it does to Milton, and manifestations of the uncanny are generated when these elements are brought into the open. In the description of his blind father for the addendum to *Story of the Eye* Bataille notes how he was characterised by a 'completely stupefying expression of abandon and aberration in a world that he alone could see' (2001, p.72), something Bataille would seem to covet. Darkness and what it represents, as potent an entity in its own right for Bataille as it is for Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*, is at the black

heart of the base in the work of Bataille, where humanity can be pulled apart, dissected and brought back to the dark world of its roots in the manner of the flowers he interrogates.

In his book *Starry Speculative Corpse: Horror of Philosophy Vol.2*, Eugene Thacker argues that:

Bataille's texts opt to darken the human, to un-do the human by revealing the shadows and nothingness at its core, to move not towards a renewed knowledge of the human, but towards something we can only call an unknowing of the human, or really, the *unhuman* (2015, p.38).

There is certainly evidence in the work of Bataille to support some aspects of this conception but then, equally, it can be suggested that his writing supports the propagation of alternatives and an abiding interest in a form of humanity that is unblinkered. Bataille expresses a desire to see humanity accept its base nature and the essence of its mortality; as Katherine Conley has observed 'it is precisely our mortality, Bataille argues, that makes us human' (2004, p.63). This doesn't necessarily mean, however, that he would desire complete erasure of the human. In *Eroticism*, for instance, there are repeated references to notions of discontinuity and absence but he also states in his introduction to the book that 'man can surmount the things that frighten him and face them squarely. In doing so, he can be rid of the curious misunderstanding of his own nature that has characterised him until now' (2006, p.7). Georges Bataille is expressing some form of hope for humanity, if it is prepared to take the plunge into darkness.

In the stop motion animation of the Quays there are echoes of this philosophy, as illustrated in *Maska*. The creature assumes the role of a countess in the court of an unnamed king, but it is constantly questioning itself and its place in the surrounding universe, the scrutinising camera of the Quays reflecting the creature's sense of disorientation and solitude. 'I stood there', it narrates, 'with dignity, wrapped in crinoline, not knowing where I was going'. Uncertainty and self-consciousness is demonstrated in the creature's physicality: as the 'countess' makes her way across the floor of the court her somewhat strange stop motion

movements resemble those of a boat. She undulates through the room as other courtiers are shown to be studying her progress, bobbing like a wave, and her actions are accompanied by expressions of doubt in the narration: ‘To where was I walking? To whom? And who was I?’

It is a sequence that encapsulates the very human sense of man going ‘constantly in fear of himself’ that Bataille describes in *Eroticism* (2006, p.7), the underlying sense that we are being pulled back whilst striding forward. It echoes Freud’s notion of the twin drives sending us in different directions simultaneously. Bataille sees in humanity the spirit of the wave: in *Eroticism* he makes reference to how ‘a man can suffer at the thought of not existing in the world like a wave lost among many other waves’ (2006, p.15). It is expressive of a sense of solitude that Bataille identifies. ‘We are discontinuous beings’, he writes, ‘individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity’. It is ‘a primal continuity linking us with everything that is’ (2006, p.15). The creature’s animated undulations suggest that it is unsure as to whether it should continue forward or throw itself back into the darkness from whence it originated, a darkness marked by destruction and death, and synonymous with Freud’s articulations of the death drive

In keeping with their predilection for detail and the exposure of the hidden, the Quays provide the creature with a parasol. It becomes almost like a third leg, which in its design hints that there is something less human and more insect beneath the mask. The parasol is also an object that partially connotes concealment: traditionally used as a shield from the sun it also provides a way to cover one’s face, to hide. Moreover, the structure of the parasol is such that it appears one thing on the surface but something else entirely underneath: a smooth, skin-like canopy conceals the mechanics of its skeleton. It is in fact the first part of the ‘countess’ glimpsed by her suitor, the subtleties of the Quay Brothers’ stop motion techniques highlight in the way the tip of the parasol emerges from out of the shadows, like the limb of an insect. A short courtship ensues.

‘On the evening of the third day’ the voice-over tells us ‘I set about investigating who I was’. The film crosscuts between shots of a mirror in a darkened bedroom and the undulating motions of the suitor as he heads for a meeting with his new love, armed with a floral bouquet and unaware of what is taking place. The stop motion animations show us the moment the creature strips away its civilised façade, in a violent and disturbing sequence. Taking hold of an inordinately large pin the creature stabs at itself, and there are shots of what appear to be the fleshly interior, penetrated and ripped open. The Quays elaborate techniques of puppet animation and object animation to create the sequence. As the suitor enters the room, the head of the ‘countess’ falls limp and the true form of the automated, insect-like entity within emerges. The sequence of events is somewhat reminiscent of the revelatory scene in the story of ‘The Sandman’, central to Freud’s vision for the uncanny, where Olympia is revealed to Nathaniel as an ‘eyeless wooden doll’ (2003, p.137). Confronted by the unedifying gore of Olympia’s bleeding eyes torn from their sockets, Nathaniel ‘is seized by a fresh access of madness’ (2003, p.138). The suitor in *Maska*, likewise, appears horrified and disoriented by the bloody removal of the mask and emergence of a monstrous automaton from the dismembered corpse: he runs into the shadows of the hall outside.

The uncanniness of the scene emanates from a number of sources simultaneously: as well as the revelation that there is something mechanical beneath the surface of an ostensibly living being, the sequence unsettles in its depiction of the violence and damage inflicted on what purports to be a sentient body. This effect is exacerbated by the addition of what could be taken for flesh, organs and substantial amounts of blood. The scene is Bataillean in its display of the body’s substances and constituent parts, placed within the context of animation that is suggestive of simultaneous birth and death. In *Eroticism* Bataille describes it thus:

death is really the opposite process to the process ending in birth, yet these opposite processes can be reconciled. The death of the one being is

correlated with the birth of the other, heralding it and making it possible.  
Life is always a product of the decomposition of life (2006, p.55).

The creature is the enacting of the collapse between these two acts, which are also profoundly uncanny, tied to the phenomenon Freud describes as the terrifying ‘fantasy of living in the womb’ and closely associated with ‘being buried alive’ (2003, p.150). It is, once again, the push/pull effect intuited in the uncanny through the ghostly presence of the death drive.

Significance can be read into the customary small details that the Quays bring to the scene through the intricacies of their stop motion techniques. Considerable focus is placed on a bright red bouquet of flowers, for instance, as the suitor’s undulating movements fatefully carry him towards the chambers of the creature. They recall the notion of the flower as defined by Georges Bataille, and by Satan in the words of Milton. It is the superficial, lifeless bloom that entices the eye whilst its true nature is concealed, and as such it foreshadows the shocking revelation of a living dead creature which follows. The choice of a pin as the object by which the creature skewers and unmask itself is, likewise, a detail heavy with connotations. So often the pin is used as a means of displaying insects in particular, trapping them and keeping them held in place for human scrutiny; what the Quays present to us is an interesting inversion of this idea, skewering instead the human form in order to liberate the insect-like automaton held beneath. Both of these seemingly minor additions to the film echo its makers’ philosophy of looking beyond the surface at what lies hidden. When the entity’s true, base and primal form is revealed the outer, aesthetically pleasing, shell is shown laying discarded on the floor alongside pools of blood and excoriated flesh, including the artificial genitalia, an astonishingly violent display of self-immolation. Similarly, the purely cosmetic beauty of the flowers is tossed aside as the suitor runs into the shadows, the bright red markers they leave acting like a trail of blood for the primal creature to follow.

The remainder of the film is devoted to a pursuit of the suitor, who is now referred to as ‘the unsuitor’ by the creature. The shift in relations between the two is described thus: ‘I lost

a lover and gained a prey'. These two short pieces of narration encapsulate both the way in which the Quays blur lines between supposed oppositions and how sex and death can so readily become intertwined, which is reflected in the stop motion sequences that constitute the hunt and murder of the 'unsuitor'. There are echoes of Bataille here but also there is a sense of the way that similar complexities and equivocations between apparent contradictions are apparent in the uncanny, the meanings of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* coming to approximate each other. As Freud writes, '*heimlich* thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*. The uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, the 'unhomely') is in some way a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, 'the homely') (2003, p.134).

One striking feature of the final pursuit in *Maska* is that, once again, there is an intimation of external control in the animation by the Quay Brothers, although, uncannily, it is unclear how much might also be driven by some inexplicable, inner compulsion, like the death drive. Like the physical manipulation of other beings demonstrated by Droz in *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes* the creature's voice-over and accompanying puppet animations hint at the notion it is being somehow directed to hunt down and kill its suitor/unsuitor, but there is a certain ambiguity to the phrasing, and to the animation it frames. 'Though I wish him no evil' the insect states 'that which is written within me may prove to be stronger than my wish'. The question remains open as to the identity of who wrote what was within. The film crosscuts between the stop motion pursuit by the creature, the fleeing of its prey, and the king who observes all of the action from a nearby window. The chase reaches its climax in a moment strikingly similar to a passionate embrace, as the creature slowly mounts its prostrate victim and delivers the fatal sting, in clear sight of the king, and there are inferences of actions being directed, in the manner of a film. There are also further indications that the Quays are seeking to merge images of death with connotations of sex, the final penetration bringing about the creature's demise, as well as that of its victim. The incremental movements of the mechanical



insect's head, as it goes in for the kill, are momentarily intercut with strikingly similar movements of the head of the countess, and both actions are repeated several times. The cutting implies that these are predetermined movements, planned and delivered via machinery animated by stop motion. but it remains unclear as to how sentient and self-determined that machinery has become by the conclusion of the film. The compulsive repetition of movement also mirrors similar motions associated with the fever of eroticism and the urge towards death depicted in *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes*, *In Absentia*, *Street of Crocodiles* and *Nocturna Artificialia*, as well as in other films by the Quay Brothers not discussed here, such as *This Unnameable Little Broom* (1985) and *Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies* (1988). It points to a driven-ness synonymous with a compulsion 'strong enough to override the pleasure principle' as identified by Freud in 'The Uncanny'.

The ending of the film remains as disorienting and ambiguous as the beginning, despite the significant revelation of what was hidden behind the mask. Having ripped away its mask, and pursued its prey compulsively to the point of death, the entity in *Maska* violently rips away remains unsure of itself, and to what extent its fears, desires and actions have been self-determined. In the guise of the creature, Stanislaw Lem writes:

I lay, still uncertain, for not knowing myself, yet that very ignorance of whether I had come as a rescuer or a murderess – it became for me something hitherto unknown, inexplicably new, investing my every tremor with a mysterious and girlish innocence, it filled me with an overwhelming joy. This joy surprised me not a little and I wondered if it might not be another manifestation of the wisdom of my inventors, who had seen to it that I find limitless power in the bringing of both succor and destruction, however I was not certain of this either (1992, p.237).

Lem's machine echoes the uncertainty and ambiguity that Freud sees as characteristic of the drives that direct us, and which are at the heart of the uncanny experience. It is telling that the creature ends its life as it began, in solitude and darkness, and questioning the nature of its sentience, unsure if it embodies life or death. It is a sense of isolation, uncertainty and a blurring of borders that is captured time and again in the animation of the Quays. Stop motion

is, in and of itself, a form of filmmaking that is characterised by ambiguity: its incremental movements are characterised by a roughness, over-determination and exposure of the joins that aid in generating uncertainty of sentience in what it animates. These features of its design are used by the Quay Brothers to explore and uncover that which is concealed: the darker aspects of the human psyche, associated with base and primal fears and instincts related to decay, destruction, eroticism and death. Their enclosed spaces and penetrating camera techniques isolate the subjects of their animations and stop motion facilitates their interrogation, opening them up and breaking them down to see into the hidden spaces, and expose what is found there. Through these processes the Quay Brothers achieve their aim, to see the world 'through a dirty pane of glass' (2002).

## **Coda:**

### **Straining to be Contained**

The previous four chapters demonstrate an uncompromising and unrestrained use of stop motion, through which the numerous manifestations of the uncanny, and associated darker aspects of the human psyche, are articulated. Shinya Tsukamoto, Jan Švankmajer and the Quay Brothers are filmmakers who have exercised their creativity in vastly different cultural contexts, but they all participate, as this thesis has argued, in a ‘dissident’ or dark tradition of animation. This additional brief chapter looks at three filmmakers – Nick Park, Tim Burton and Henry Selick – who operate within more conventional practices of animation, and argues that their stop motion work has retained some of these darker registers. The claim of this research has been that all stop motion animation has the potential to unsettle, but that its discomfiting nature is amplified by combining the innate uncanniness of its form with thematic and narrative aspects as elaborated by Freud in his original essay ‘The Uncanny’. The intention of this coda is to show that this potential is far-reaching, and is even detectable in the films of some of the most commercially successful animators currently working.

Writers and scholars have noted the unsettling presence of uncanniness in more conventional, contemporary stop motion films. For instance, in an article for the October 2005 edition of *Esquire* entitled ‘Unreally, Really Cool’, Mike D’Angelo identifies examples of stop motion from the films of Tim Burton and Nick Park as sharing ‘the same singular, outré visual allure. They’re *uncanny*’ (2005, p.72). He suggests that characters rendered through stop motion techniques, such as Gromit in the Park films, fascinate us because they are ‘at once real and not real. Human beings are drawn to borders, gray areas, the mystery of the in-between’ and, in comparison to live action cinema, stop motion ‘pushes this dichotomy

one step further, straddling the line that separates reality from imagination' (2005, p.74). The uncanniness of stop motion is retained in the more commercial sectors because, as D'Angelo seems to suggest, it is inherent to the form and cannot be disentangled from it.

It is also the case that, as has been argued earlier in this thesis, animation has often been marginalised and overlooked in comparison to live action film. Its fringe status facilitates the secretion of unexpectedly dark themes. There is an additional factor to consider in relation to the narrative techniques employed by Park, Selick and Burton in presenting their uncanny visions: all three filmmakers routinely use forms of comedy to ostensibly neutralise the unedifying elements in their work. By briefly examining each director's recurrent use of stop motion animation this coda aims to demonstrate that those elements which engender a sense of the uncanny in the viewer are not entirely sublimated by the addition of comedy and have retained some of their unsettling effect.

## **Aardman & the Uncanny**

Working at Aardman Studios in the UK since the mid-1980s, Nick Park is arguably one of the most celebrated of contemporary stop motion animators. His films are, most certainly, among the biggest successes of the stop motion sub-genre in financial terms, and his 'Wallace and Gromit' productions in particular have received considerable acclaim, winning countless international awards that include three Oscars. Despite their international appeal, however, there is a persistent sense in his clay animations of something identifiably British, and nowhere is this more lucidly illustrated than in the films featuring Wallace and Gromit, a middle-aged man and his dog. They live in a typical red-brick terraced house in an archetypal Northern English town made up of similar terraced houses, and there is a constant emphasis on the comforts of home: Wallace's slippers and the local newspaper, the rituals around food

and mealtimes, a pleasantly ticking wall clock, the comfort of a bed or an armchair, the regional accent. They superficially communicate safety, through the security of routine and the everyday. The anthropomorphising of Gromit, a dog who makes breakfast, walks on two legs and knits, is somehow made acceptable by the fact he never speaks. He displays an almost Chaplinesque character, looking to the camera when something goes awry, a likeness which is accentuated by his silence. Acceptance of his humanisation is also related to the widely-held perception of dogs in British culture as ‘one of the family’, which is a view shared in many other western cultures.

The ostensibly harmonious depiction in the films, however, is routinely disrupted by the catastrophes that ensue in relation to Wallace’s hobby. He is a kind of Heath Robinson-inspired inventor, creating ridiculously over-complicated contraptions that inevitably turn on their inventor. Although the scenes where the machines take on a strange sentience are often comedic, there is also a playfully sinister or sadistic element to them that unsettles, activated through stop motion techniques of clay animation, and connotative of the uncanny through the way the dark playfulness elides distinctions between the human and the mechanical, the animate and the inanimate. The use of stop motion increases the sense of movement as both familiar yet strange through its incrementality. The presence of the silent Gromit in such sequences recalls Chaplin’s encounters with machines in *Modern Times* (Chaplin, 1936) and the way in which, as Bruce Glenville writes, they ‘threaten, quite literally, to consume the worker’ (2002, p.26).

What is crucial about the tone in the Wallace and Gromit adventures is that the traumatic situations they’re placed in are often infused with a strong injection of the blackly comic, and in that sense the films can be perceived as adhering to a long-standing British tradition of finding humour in the darkest of subjects. Whilst not exclusively British, as has been demonstrated earlier in this thesis, ‘gallows’ or ‘black’ humour is a common feature in

Britain's culture, and can be prominently identified in the work of writers as diverse as Shakespeare, Jonathan Swift and Roald Dahl. It is often a recognisable element in British cinema, too: Ealing comedies such as *Kind Hearts & Coronets* (Hamer, 1949) and *The Ladykillers* (Mackendrick, 1955) or films produced by the Monty Python comedy troupe such as *Monty Python & the Holy Grail* (Gilliam & Jones, 1975) and *The Life of Brian* (Jones, 1979) demonstrate how intrinsic black humour is to the British psyche. In their book *Comics and the World Wars: A Cultural Record* (2015) authors Jane Chapman, Anna Hoyles, Andrew Kerr and Adam Sheriff note that gallows humour became 'a fundamental aspect of the culture and attitude of British "Tommys" serving on the front line' but also highlight how it 'constitutes an intrinsic part of British identity that predates the Elizabethan era' (2015, p.43).

The way that gallows humour retains a sense of uncanniness has been discussed here, in relation to the stop motion animation of Jan Švankmajer, and a similar vein is detectable in the films of Nick Park. It can be linked specifically to stop motion's embodiment of forms of animism, the elision of borders between the inanimate and animate, the sentient and the mechanical, loss of identity through the 'manifestation of forces' within the familiar (2003, p.150), and the threat of inertia, and death. The difference between the approaches of the two film-makers is that Park's dark comedy is accompanied by other forms of comedy, such as slapstick; there is always resolution and a return to equilibrium; a sense of childlike innocence is attributed to the character of Wallace; and there is a signalling that the film is aware of its materiality and the tropes of certain genres. The uncanny effects are reduced by these elements, but they are not entirely sublimated. There are moments when the uncanny nature of stop motion bleeds through and is playfully, disturbingly, realised in the text.

The Wallace and Gromit films have seen them pursued by a serial killer in *A Matter of Loaf & Death* (Park, 2008); inveigled into a museum theft by a sociopathic penguin in *The Wrong*

*Trousers* (Park, 1993); confronting an evil ‘cyber-dog’ in *A Close Shave* (Park, 1995); running from a psychotic cooker in *A Grand Day Out* (Park, 1989); and, in their most elaborate adventure undoing *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (Lord & Park, 2005) which has turned Wallace into a rampaging monster. Moments of horror and violence often blend knowingly with the sense of black humour: for instance, in *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* we see a clay animated image of Gromit raising a large knife to the sound of suspense-filled music... and then slamming it down on a carrot.

Aimed at a family audience, the Wallace and Gromit animations are imbued with a sense of fun and adventure, and slapstick is a key ingredient in their creation; but it is important to note that all five films received a PG rating when released for home viewing. Whilst the various tones of comedy shift from dark to light and back again, and ameliorate some of the unsettling effects linked to uncanniness there are moments when the hidden fears associated with the phenomenon are exposed. The use of stop motion is inextricable from these moments, as they typically play on the incremental nature of the form. A prime example is the transformation of Wallace into the were-creature as witnessed by Gromit and several bystanders. Cutting between glimpses of different body parts undergoing transformation and the reactions of those watching, the film momentarily – and perhaps unwittingly – allows the disturbing manifestations of the uncanny apparent in the situation an equivocal share of the screen, alongside elements of comedy. It is the impression of a body no longer in control of itself, the apparent ‘manifestation of forces’, that provokes a feeling of the uncanny, as well as a sense that the body’s integrity is under threat. Stop motion emphasises the gradual nature of the process, and disconcerts with its images of recognisable features of the body taking on unrecognisable attributes.

*The Wrong Trousers* offers a number of uncanny depictions, which are given emphasis through increments of stop motion movement. Its narrative is built around Wallace’s

eponymous invention, a pair of remote-controlled mechanical trousers; designed for domestic applications, the trousers are usurped for nefarious purposes by a silent, sociopathic jewellery thief, in the guise of a penguin. Wallace becomes unwittingly trapped inside the trousers, and is pressed into using them to commit a diamond robbery; it is left to Gromit to rescue him and save the day. The malfunctioning, misappropriated trousers provide moments of slapstick comedy, but they also unsettle through their manipulations of Wallace, and the incessant stamp which marks their motion, a frenzy of stop motion movement that accentuates their demonic nature. Unable to remove or control the robotic legs, Wallace is left helplessly dangling as they assume control of his body and frenziedly march vertically upwards in order to reach the window through which the robbery will be committed. Like the metallic extrusions of Shinya Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo* films, the trousers transform Wallace into a fusion of man and machine, and assume the characteristics of a sentient yet malevolent, possessed being.

The darker aspects of the intimate bond between Wallace and Gromit are interrogated at greater length in a 1997 article by Esther Leslie. She begins by examining the complex relationship between man and dog, and on a much wider scale man and nature, as it has evolved across the centuries. In one of the most striking sections Leslie articulates concerns about the 'ongoing instrumental violation of animals' and how those who officially instigated the still-controversial practice of scientific research on living creatures perceived them as soulless, an idea drawn from the theories of René Descartes. 'Live animals', she writes 'flayed and dissected appeared to the vivisectionists as watch or clock mechanisms. Ostensibly activated by wheels, ratchets, springs, gears and weights, they were conceived as automatons' (1997, p.150), and could therefore be broken down into their constituent parts. It is a merging of the sentient and the mechanical that renders the animal uncanny, a clear parallel with the ostensibly human figure of Olympia that Freud identifies as 'clockwork' and



‘an automaton’ in his description of *The Sandman* (2003, p.137); it has some parallels with the process by which stop motion is created, the deconstruction of sentience into isolated movements that often take on a slightly odd, mechanical appearance.

As Leslie observes, the separation of human from other has been somewhat elided by changing attitudes towards the animal kingdom in the last hundred years or so. Acceptance by audiences of Gromit’s anthropomorphism is an indication of the ways in which animals have become humanised: dogs and cats are members of the family, whilst others have been reconfigured into harmless cuddly toys for the pacification of children. Gromit is a figure who is identified with both of these models: he is both Wallace’s ‘family’ and a stuffed toy made for children. In discussing Gromit’s status, however, Esther Leslie notes that punishment of animals in Park’s films ‘is never completely screened out’ (1997, p.151), and there are a number of scenes which indicate that the humanising process is problematic. Gromit is falsely identified and locked up in *A Close Shave*, for instance; he is coerced into moving from his bedroom to a kennel by Wallace in *The Wrong Trousers*; and is undeservedly muzzled and alienated by Wallace when his psychopathic girlfriend pretends to have been bitten in *A Matter of Loaf & Death*. What Park implies is that there is a lingering sense of otherness in the humanisation of the dog that opens up a connective fissure to the primal, uncanny fear experienced by perceiving changes in the familiar image.

It raises questions regarding how humans relate to their own animal ancestry and the continuing presence of the primal and base within themselves. In Georges Bataille’s description of ‘Wild Animals’ for the *Encyclopaedia Acephalica* he articulates the ‘violent need... to cast off the gestures and attitudes requisite to human nature’ (1995, p.60) that is repressed and bleeds through to the surface in the experience of the uncanny. It is the fear of exposing this aspect of our natures, and of the drive towards death that is encoded within it, that is projected onto the behaviour of Gromit in the Park films. Projection through fear also

manifests itself in sequences such as the bestial transformation in *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*, Gromit's manipulation of a puppet monster, and the encounter with an aggressive robot bulldog in *A Close Shave*. When Wallace is first witnessed becoming the were-rabbit, for instance, the focus is placed on the reactions of those who see the change, and on parts of his body transforming, captured in increments of clay animation. In this way the emergence of the primal is clearly framed by reactions denoting fear and terror, and is defined by uncanniness inherent in the stop motion articulations which capture each individual movement.

Gromit's manipulation of a female rabbit puppet, in another scene from the film, is achieved by his simultaneous mimicry of its movements, and although this contains elements of slapstick, particularly when Gromit catches sight of a low bridge to which Wallace is oblivious, there is a disturbing effect created by the effacement of Gromit's sentience in an inanimate object made animate. This becomes more apparent when Gromit is subsequently dressed as the doll in an attempt to lure a hunter away from Wallace's scent. His status as a surrogate human is thrown into question and his base nature, as an unthinking entity, accentuated.

The stop motion mechanical dog of *A Close Shave* is depicted by Park as red-eyed and murderous, like *The Terminator* in James Cameron's thriller (1983), and it is reminiscent of the headline-grabbing 'pets who turn', specific instances of family dogs who suddenly and without apparent warning turn on their owners, or on other members of the public. These relatively rare and unfortunate incidents are often sensationalised by the red-top press, and the animals are a projected embodiment of the uncanny manifestation associated with insanity, when it seems so out of kilter with the external persona that it can 'arouse in the onlooker vague notions of automatic – mechanical – processes that may lie hidden behind the familiar image' (2003, p.135) of a living being. In Park's films such perceived indications of

the primal and base are is duly punished. In *A Matter of Loaf & Death*, for instance, Wallace's knee-jerk response to the accusation of a dog bite is to muzzle and tether his faithful companion, problematising the notion of Gromit's humanisation.

## **Death Becomes Them: Tim Burton & Henry Selick**

By coincidence, one of Tim Burton's earliest stop motion films, *Vincent* (1982) depicts an aspiring young Frankenstein experimenting on his own pet dog, in an expressionist laboratory of high voltage dials and Tesla coils. The film is created through a combination of puppet and clay animation techniques, where wires are used to provide maximum articulation of the figures. The film is given a grimly comedic element by the narration of a poem during the sequence, and a knowingness in that it is read by Vincent Price. It is just one example of how Burton has negotiated a way of expressing something very dark and uncanny, the collapse of boundaries between the living and the dead, with the significant aid of black comedy and an awareness of film history. Key to how Burton expresses that 'darkness' is something Mark Salisbury identifies in his collaborative biography of the director *Burton on Burton*: the fact that, regardless of whether he is working with drawings, clay figures, computer images or real actors 'in many ways Burton's movies... can be seen as animated exercises' since their focus is typically on 'characters and situations that exist outside the realms of reality' (2006, p.xv). There is a slightly different argument to be made however, that Burton operates on the fringes of reality. His films are routinely expressions of the liminal, exploring the boundaries.

In her book *The Philosophy of Tim Burton* (2014) Jennifer L. McMahon writes that no other modern American film director 'has as obvious a preoccupation with death or as disarming a knack for the uncanny. Death is literally everywhere in his works, and it is presented in such a way as to readily engender the experience uncanny' (2014, p.224). She

contends that, through Burton's 'success conveying the unpalatable truth of human finitude to the general public' his works 'help audiences toward the existential goal of authenticity, namely, honest awareness of the human condition' (2014, p.215). McMahon asserts that his films so routinely incorporate darker aspects of the psyche and phenomena related to the uncanny that they are helping to make its themes acceptable to the wider public. It is a questionable assertion, but it is interesting to observe how Burton's particular interpretations of the Gothic have proved so critically and financially successful, given that, like Park, Burton sublimates darkness whilst retaining some of its potency. Burton also uses a combination of comedy, the childlike and knowingness in his films and, similarly to Park, stop motion animation is frequently the vehicle through which he achieves his uncanny effects.

*Vincent* typifies the way in which Burton expresses his knowledge of cinema and of its genres. The character's idolatry of a particular namesake – 'he wants to be just like Vincent Price' – is expressed through a penchant for horror and the gothic, and every moment of the six minute stop motion short is infused with the classic *mise-en-scène* of the genre: the fizzing, popping lab set draws us back into the world of *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931) and its sequels; whilst the pervasive, thickening fog is reminiscent of *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931) or *Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1932); in the distorted angularity and lengthening shadows of the rooms, one can see the stylisation of the madman's eye from *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920) or more pertinently the animated version of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* (Ted Parmelee, 1953).

*Vincent's* uncanny stop motion existence, swaying precariously on the cusp of life and death, emulates that of Poe's most haunted protagonists, many of whom Vincent Price portrayed on screen. We might consider particularly his role as Roderick Usher in director Roger Corman's adaptation of *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1960). Burton's *Vincent* is an

animate/inanimate hybrid, unsure himself whether he is truly alive or dead, as he illustrates through his excessive preoccupation with issues of mortality. The film concludes with Vincent reciting a passage from Poe's *The Raven* (1845), an ending that, Burton recalls, wasn't overly popular with its sponsors, the Disney Corporation. 'They wanted me to have the light click on and have his dad come in and go, "Let's go to a football game or a baseball game". That was my first encounter with the happy ending syndrome' (2006, p.17). Instead, Burton opts for the possibility that Vincent is completely losing his grip on reality and descending into madness. The 'uncanny effect produced by... manifestations of insanity' (2003, p.135) that Freud identifies is detectable in the ending of the film, which, unlike Park, is left unresolved and uncannily ambiguous.

Burton's focus would subsequently switch to the production of live action shorts and features throughout the next decade, although the relevance of Salisbury's comments – that these were essentially animations in all but name – is exemplified by films such as *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) or *Batman Returns* (1992), increasingly dark tales of freakish outsiders for whom the distinctions between life and death or reality and fantasy are, at best, profoundly nebulous. *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, made in collaboration with fellow animator Henry Selick and released in 1993, was a concept that Burton had intended to make his next project after *Vincent*. It would eventually see the light of day in 1993 with Burton credited as co-producer and the originator of the story; Henry Selick would assume the role of director.

Selick contributed in various guises to storyboards and visual effects for several particularly dark and strange Disney releases in the 1980s, *Return to Oz* (Walter Murch, 1985) and *The Watcher in the Woods* (John Hough, 1980). The films were intended for family audiences but, interestingly they struggled to find them. The suggestion of many critics was that the tone of the two films was far too dark and nightmarish for children. Interestingly, both live

action films feature sequences of nightmarish creatures animated in stop motion sequences by Selick, living dead creations that appear almost demonic. They are an interesting precursor to the creations in *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, a Halloween-set story in which the Pumpkin King, Jack Skellington, kidnaps Santa 'Claws' – one of many misinterpretations he makes of Christmas – and takes over, only to find that his somewhat darker take on the festive season is hugely unpopular with children. The film ends with equilibrium – and Father Christmas – restored.

*The Nightmare Before Christmas* is clearly inspired in part by the work of formidable stop motion predecessors, such as Ray Harryhausen and Czech animator Wladyslaw Starewicz, with particular reference to *The Devil's Ball*, aka *Fétiche* (1934), discussed in chapter 1 of this thesis. Starewicz's 30 minute short, a complex blend of live action and integrated stop-motion characters, features as its highlight the eponymous demonic celebration. As the town clock strikes the witching hour, base creatures, detritus and decaying organisms from the street spring to life. The Burton/Selick production includes a similar selection of misshapen, unconventional partygoers, congratulating themselves on the splendid horror of their most recent Halloween. They will later attempt to turn Christmas into the same nightmarish celebration, only to discover that such black festivity has its place.

If the rituals themselves are depicted as spectacularly uncanny events peopled by animistic stop motion incarnations, there are several characters who are particularly unsettling, if amusing. Sally is a ghoulishly attractive love interest for Jack Skellington, whose visible joints through stitching mark her out as akin to Frankenstein's monster, although her delicate, doll-like form belies this notion. Her supposed creator is a strange duck-headed hybrid, confined to a wheelchair, who she poisons repeatedly in an attempt to escape. Sally attempts to rescue Jack when he is captured, and in an attempt to seduce his kidnapper she presents her leg suggestively from behind a curtain; it is only when the curtain is pulled back that we see

the leg is unattached. The stitching across her limbs and neck is thus revealed to be more than simply decoration. It is a blackly comic and yet disturbing reminder that Sally is neither entirely a living being nor a dead one, but something like Frankenstein, a creature in between. Severed body parts are referred to by Freud as ‘highly uncanny’ and ‘especially when they are credited ... with independent activity’, as is the case in this sequence (2003, p.150). Further, Sally’s embodiment of a particularly dangerous and potentially deadly form of seductive sexuality can be likened to something Bataille. As Georges Bataille notes in his introduction to *Eroticism* ‘what does physical eroticism signify if not a violation of the very being of its practitioners? – a violation bordering on death, bordering on murder?’ (2006, p.17).

The captor Sally tries to fool is himself an intriguingly uncanny creation. Identified as Oogie Boogie, he is clearly regarded as an adversary to be feared, and as his voice and penchant for singing would indicate he is something of a variation on the villainous creatures Betty Boop encountered in the short cartoons of the Fleischers (e.g. *Minnie the Moocher*, Dave Fleischer, 1932; *Snow-White*, Dave Fleischer, 1933). His extraordinary bravado, however, is subsequently shown to mask nothing more than the most bizarre anatomical structure; once the ghost-like sacking that covers him starts to become unstitched, he is revealed to be constituted entirely of small, squealing bugs, a swarm in a Halloween costume, which instantly falls apart and scuttles off into the darkness. It is a scene which typifies classical narrative’s satisfying depiction of the defeat of the villain, and the song is grimly humorous, but it is also a disturbing representation of how the body can decay and simply fall apart. The scene draws upon Freud’s thoughts concerning the uncanny and the ‘single phases in the evolution of the sense of self, a regression to times when the ego had not yet clearly set itself off against the world outside and from others’. (2003, p.143). In the animistic enigma of the Oogie Boogie Man the curious state of human biology is reflected, as so many cells

strung together in a sack of skin; it engenders a fear related to how very easily the body's integrity can be threatened, undone by a single loose thread. It is the precarious nature of sentience that Freud makes apparent in 'The Uncanny' and that Bataille makes plain in *Eroticism*, describing how 'death, the rupture of the discontinuous individualities to which we cleave in terror, stands there before us more real than life itself' (2006, p.19).

In terms of his more recent work with stop motion, Burton has directed *Corpse Bride* (2005) and then most recently *Frankenweenie* (2012), a feature-length version of a short film he made for Disney in 1984. Both films use the same techniques of puppet animation employed in *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, and in similar vein they focus on the blur between the living and the dead, their narratives purposely muddying any distinctions between the two by freely resurrecting those who have passed. In *Corpse Bride* a literal marrying of opposites results in uncanny sequences such as the musical number 'Remains of the Day' performed by a choreographed group of all singing, all dancing skeletons. As in the films of Nick Park, gallows humour is used as a way of reducing the unsettling effect of the scene. The initial premise of the film, that a living groom may be dragged off into the land of the dead and forced to marry a deceased bride, is reminiscent of Freud's thoughts on the subject of our relationship with death in 'The Uncanny'. Described as a 'primitive fear' Freud notes that 'it is probably still informed by the old idea that whoever dies becomes the enemy of the survivor, intent upon carrying him off with him to share his new existence' (2003, p.149). In *Frankenweenie* a young boy's success in resurrecting his dead dog, an act which bears distinct resemblances in theme to Burton's previous short, *Vincent*, sets off a series of events in which a variety of other animals are brought back to life in his home town. What Freud calls 'the acme of the uncanny', in the form of 'death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts' (2003, p.148) is enacted by the chaos that ensues.



Since *The Nightmare Before Christmas* Henry Selick has also directed several more feature length stop motion projects, *James & the Giant Peach* (1996) and most notably *Coraline* (2009). Made for family audiences, *Coraline* is the dark tale of a girl who stumbles upon a parallel universe in her new house, complete with an alternative mother and father, an unsettling invocation of the double who assumes ‘the same facial features, the same characters (...) even the same names’ (2003, p.142). The most significant difference from Coraline’s real parents, apart from an increased attentiveness which later turns psychotic, are the eyes which have been replaced with buttons. There are clear parallels with the tale of ‘The Sandman’, which Freud discusses at length in ‘The Uncanny’. These distinctions are made more apparent when Coraline refuses to leave her own world and is imprisoned by the substitute mother behind a mirror, where she finds other children who have had their eyes stolen and cannot return to reality without them. The uncanny sense of bodily violation, and particularly of the eye, is noted by Freud in his essay where he writes ‘some children have a terrible fear of damaging or losing their eyes. Many retain this anxiety into adult life and fear no physical injury so much as one to the eye’ (2003, p.139). It is a theme that has been covered quite extensively in this thesis, most significantly as a recurring motif in the work of Jan Švankmajer, and feels especially unedifying within the context of what is ostensibly a family film.

It is one of a number of instances in the stop motion films of Park, Burton and Selick where the joints literally become visible and the uncanny qualities of its animations are able to slip through the cracks. The sequences are a demonstration of the form’s resistance to sublimating techniques, such as the infusion of comedy, a display of knowingness in regards to cinematic trickery and the motifs of certain film genres, such as horror or the musical, or the resolution of happy ever after. As such, they offer an additional, intriguing perspective on the notion that stop motion can render darkness visible.

## **Conclusion:**

### **When Stop Meets Motion**

This thesis has sought to demonstrate that the uncanny and stop motion animation enjoy a special relationship, one characterised by a sense of darkness becoming visible. The techniques by which stop motion is created, through the graduated articulations of still objects edited together frame by frame to capture a sense of movement, have remained essentially unchanged since the days when they were practised by Georges Méliès and Wladyslaw Starewicz. Those filmmakers, and others like them, express a child-like excitement and curiosity associated with possession of a new toy, but like their contemporary, Sigmund Freud, they also made manifest the fears and concerns of the burgeoning modern age, then starting to eclipse the Victorianism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Such preoccupations would be brought into sharp focus by the startling destructiveness of the First World War, and, as Hal Foster observes, in the face of traumatised soldiers reliving scenes on the battlefield over and over, ‘Freud developed the notion of compulsive repetition essential to the theories of the uncanny and the death drive’ (1993, p.1). The way a troubled relationship with death started to reveal its presence within the living is suggestive of the notion Freud expresses in ‘The Uncanny’, where ‘that which was intended to remain secret, hidden away (...) has come into the open’ (2003, p.132). It cannot be mere coincidence that stop motion, a development of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, is likewise associated with the revealing of that which should be concealed, and moreover consists of moments of lifelessness, of inertia, only partially hidden by apparent movement, the illusion of life,

In their respective analyses of cinema’s negotiations with uncanniness, Laura Mulvey and Tom Gunning have recognised that film is capable of embodying the dark fears and concerns

related to the collapsing of boundaries and merging of oppositions that are at the centre of its disturbing effects, and particularly at points where the experience of film viewing has been subject to dramatic technological change, such as in the rapid developments of early cinema and as a result of the home video revolution. It is at these times that its materiality has been most exposed to its audience. Stop motion, this research argues, has retained these qualities throughout its history because of the processes by which it is created, that consistently reveal its materiality to the audience. It is a form that is written through with uncanniness: it comes built in.

This is precisely why, it is asserted here, that its practitioners have often produced work that is marked by uncanniness in its narratives and themes. The peculiar mix of stillness and kineticism, of life and lifelessness that is engrained within its creation, has frequently resulted in those qualities bleeding through to the surface and characterising the unsettling depictions within its animation. The specific ways in which that disturbing element makes its presence felt within the films is subject to the idiosyncrasies of the animator, and to the social and historic contexts in which they work. This research has presented some of those animators and contexts, paying particular attention to filmmakers who have shown a willingness to fully engage with the darkness inherent in stop motion, and within the phenomenon of the uncanny. It has also acknowledged other animators who work in ways that sublimate the uncanny effect through elements of humour and knowingness in relation to cinema and genre, and illustrated how the uncanniness continues to peek through regardless.

Surrealists have often been drawn to facets of the uncanny; however, this research has shown that, when articulated through techniques of stop motion, it is the more dissident forms of Surrealist thought that materialise. The work of Georges Bataille, in particular, appears to breathe similar air, marked by a preoccupation with probing the darker aspects of the human psyche, the base and primal qualities, and associations with destruction, decay and death. As

has been demonstrated, there is also an element of the erotic in the work of many stop motion animators that is made more disturbing by its proximity to violence and death, a convergence that can be likened to the philosophy of Georges Bataille and to Freud's conception of 'The Uncanny', which foregrounds his work on the complex relationship between the life/sex drives and the death drive, that he saw as pulling us in different directions at once.

The stop motion animation of Shinya Tsukamoto, discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis draws on the context of modern Tokyo's technological advancement to create his metallisation effects, fragments of machines and other items of detritus animated and made to appear as if they are taking over the bodies of his protagonists. The disturbing manifestations suggest signs of illness, their uncanny effect related to what Freud terms 'the influence of demons' (2003, p.150), as well as fears that the body is losing its integrity, associated in 'The Uncanny' with castration, and the proximity to death. The physical properties of object and clay animation, and the incremental nature of stop motion, with its idiosyncratic deliberateness of movement, accentuate the fear of biological trauma and loss of identity. There is an unsettling impression of doubling as the body becomes simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, which is aligned with the way Bataille perceives otherness not as something to be projected but as indicative of the primal and base elements of the self that should be accepted. His desire is satisfied by the conclusion of *Tetsuo* and *Bodyhammer*, in which two characters who uncannily mirror each other's appropriation of metal, become conjoined.

The chapter describes a series of scenes in which object animation is used by Tsukamoto to establish problematic sexual relationships between the leading characters. Animated metal extrusions are wielded in ways to suggest a sudden outpouring of uninhibited sexuality, coupled with a desire to inflict pain and threaten life. It suggests too that the metallisation is stimulated further by the sadomasochistic desires expressed. They can be understood as combining Bataillean preoccupations with the proximity of eroticism to death and the pull

towards the death drive, merging uncannily with the sexual or life instincts. The jerking nature of the animations infers that a form of destructive sexuality is stirring into life from within the protagonists, one that reaches its apotheosis at the end of both Tetsuo films when they become conjoined, an uncanny collapse of boundaries and of the body. Pixilations are used to depict their violent irruption into the controlled urban streets of Tokyo.

Images of the womb are a particularly disconcerting feature of both *Tetsuo* and *Bodyhammer*, as images suggesting birth are repeatedly seen to merge with those connoting death. The ambiguity of stop motion, where life and lifelessness is expressed simultaneously, epitomises Tsukamoto's 'New World', where people are consumed by and borne out of artificial wombs of metal and plastic. The animated 'rhizome', root or tentacle that the director intercuts throughout the two films likewise connotes both forward motion associated with independence and individual advancement whilst at the same time it suggests umbilical attachment and the return to an interdependent, intrauterine state. The image is echoed in Bataille's celebration of the root in 'The Language of Flowers' thriving in darkness and filth, representation of the base. The frenzied stop motion animation of the tentacle in the *Tetsuo* films suggests that they are likewise nourished by darkness and decay, and that they are images associated with the primal.

Chapters 3 and 4 examined different aspects of prolific animator Jan Švankmajer's stop motion work with an eye to the black humour he impresses on it. The thesis distinguishes itself from previous critical work on Švankmajer by suggesting that the Surrealism he displays in his animation can be likened to that of Bataille, an expression of the base and primal that is interested in the physical properties of objects and the rawness, dirt and decay that is an integral part of them. As the chapters suggested, this shared proclivity links both Bataille and Švankmajer to the materiality of stop motion. Identifying his desire to maintain a connection with childhood and the way 'children, tribes, surrealists and hermetics' see the

world (Vertigo 2007a), the first of the two chapters explored how the home is made uncanny by the presence of playfully sinister animated objects, that make strange the familiar setting of the home. It's an approach that is contextualised by Švankmajer's own experience, growing up and working as a filmmaker in Czechoslovakia, a country that had been taken over by an oppressive Communist regime at the time in which Švankmajer was making many of the films discussed here. Animation makes physical the sense that anything could be alive and threaten in Švankmajer's films, and that even the home is not a safe refuge.

The extraordinarily uncanny image of a coffin that inters itself in a tomb, the epitome of the living dead, was discussed in this context and in relation to Švankmajer's fondness for what could be termed black or gallows humour. What emerges from this and the following chapter is a sense of Švankmajer using dark comedy, particularly in relation to death, as a coping mechanism, a way of dealing with the proximity of death and its very real threat in the Czechoslovakia of the 1960s and 70s. The stop animations that can be characterised in Švankmajer's work as blackly comic remain uncanny because they are so dark and macabre; rather than something which simply engenders mirth, Švankmajer's humour is accompanied by a grim irony. His stop motion images engage with the same vein of humour as the 'trick' animations of Georges Méliès but within a very specific cultural context.

As the chapters on Jan Švankmajer's animation have demonstrated, his objects routinely destroy each other, or themselves. The coffin is one of many objects in his films that fall to dust and become base materials. It can be taken as a representation of ruin and decay or alternatively as suggestive of the will to release the object from its preserved, repressed state, to unleash the secret essence of the object. Both infer the presence of the uncanny, the release of repression synonymous with Freud's notion of the hidden coming into the open, whilst destruction and decay engender unsettling feelings related to mortality and death. There is also a recognisable coalescence with Bataille's belief that destruction and violence 'can bring

about a change' (Hegarty 2000), and with his views on the formless. Whilst connotative of liberation, the loss of form can also be linked to the uncanny through the loss of integrity, identity and individuation, synonymous with death.

Freedom was a key theme in chapter 4, an element of Švankmajer's work by which this thesis connects the use of stop motion animation in his work to the Surreal although, as has been stated, it often seems closer to Bataille in theme and intent. The problematic nature of freedom is examined, its implied collapsing of boundaries and of structure discussed through the prism of biology and in relation to the body. Švankmajer often depicts parts of the body as liberated from the whole, moving independently or exaggeratedly. Sometimes he substitutes them or elides their purpose, and the effect is frequently disturbing. There is a clear contextual relationship between Švankmajer's desire to express freedom and liberation as 'the only theme' (Sampsonia Way, 2012) and the philosophies of the Marquis de Sade, and this correlation is indicative of how freedom can have a darker, uncanny side.

The lasciviousness Švankmajer displays in relation to the teeth and tongue has been explored and given context by the fact that Švankmajer struggled as a boy to eat and so became orally fixated. The chapter makes connections between this and the animator's preoccupation with consumption, although this is also a pertinent indicator of his political views on the consumer capitalist society. The ways in which Jan Švankmajer interrogates the eye were examined, the deconstruction of their appearance and purpose questioned by his stop motion techniques. The inference of such sequences, it is asserted, is that Švankmajer is attempting to change our way of seeing, a notion that is associated with the concept of liberation, although it is particularly unsettling to suggest damage or anything that might cause 'commensurate anxiety' according to Freud (2003). Ocularity, this thesis has asserted, is central to many forms of the uncanny, so any threat to the organ is particularly unsettling.

The chapter considered the troubling way in which eroticism is explored through the eye by Švankmajer in relation to the Marquis de Sade and the film *Conspirators of Pleasure*. The mannequins and people who engage in extreme sadomasochistic activities fulfil the desires of the Marquis for complete liberation, but this is problematised by the uncanny way in which the deaths of mannequins blur with those of living beings. The stop motion eyes that bulge exaggeratedly in the film are a nexus of both fear and excitement but it is ultimately unclear whether it is either or both that they are experiencing, an ambiguity that is chilling. The way that Švankmajer problematises the eye is synonymous with Bataille, who frequently includes ocular associations alongside themes of eroticism and death, most notably in *Story of the Eye*.

The chapter on the Quay brothers explored their use of stop motion through themes of solitude and darkness, two often overlooked manifestations of the uncanny in Freud's essay. It argued that their use of puppet animation and models in collaboration with enclosed sets and close framing with the camera exposes the visible joins of the figures and workings, their baseness and signs of rot and decay. Unlike previous studies it is both wider in that it engages with films from various points in their animating career and more focused in its specific study of the stop motion techniques used. Bataille's predilection for rottenness and base substances related to death and decay was likened to the Quays in the chapter, as well as their mutual display of the relationship between the erotic and death, reflected in the Brothers' animations.

The use of compulsive repetition was examined in this context, as it uncannily recurs over and over again in their stop motion work, and often in conjunction with animation that connotes a convergence between futile eroticism and death. It suggests that they are preoccupied with the notion of the death drive, which remains largely an unspoken presence in 'The Uncanny' outside of Freud's references to repetition. These references have their own erotic undertones, and coalescence with the views of Bataille as expressed in his comments



on the way ‘the fever of sex seizes us’ and how ‘we squander considerable resources to no real purpose’ (2006, p.170).

The chapter related a sense of aimlessness to the reader, which is communicated through stop motion images of characters wandering alone as if lost. It was asserted that this is a significant method via which the Quay Brothers express the solitude of their characters, which is also articulated through uncanny signs of madness or insanity in which psychosis isolates the patient. Their mania, it is suggested, is frequently expressed through stop motion expressions of repetition, and there are reiterated images of objects manically spinning and juddering as if they are being controlled by someone, connoting what Freud refers to as the ‘omnipotence of thoughts’ (2003, p.147).

The desire ‘to make a world that is seen through a dirty pane of glass’ (Senses of Cinema 2002) was explored in relation to the uncanny animations of body parts and detritus interacting in films such as *Street of Crocodiles* (1986), and the way that objects and figures are frequently deconstructed or discarded, left to lie in dust, dirt and blood. Their images are Bataillean in the way that they take bodies apart, such as the tall man in *Street of Crocodiles*, and in how the puppet figures are left to rot as so much decaying detritus, as exemplified by the figure of the woodcutter in *Piano Tuner of Earthquakes* or the body masking the creature in *Maska*. Such disturbing, uncanny images of the body in pieces mark a point of ‘horror and fascination’ for Bataille (2006, p.56).

As discussed, the double is a recurring theme in the stop motion work of the Quays and is embodied in the figure of the demon who seems to either mirror or control the insane patient in *In Absentia*. The unsettling effects of the double are also captured in the relationship between Felisberto and the woodcutter in *Piano Tuner*... Duplications are embellished by the processes of stop motion, this thesis argued, as each individual movement is given more

attention through the deliberateness of the form's frame by frame articulations. The status of the Quay Brothers as twins is interesting in this regard, as is the notion of solitude.

The examples of films from these three animating entities encompass, to varying degrees, all of the categories of uncanniness identified by Freud and explained in more detail in chapter 1 of this thesis. There is often significant difference in the way that each of them interprets those manifestations but there is coalescence in their chilling, uncanny effect. Context plays an important role in how the incarnations of the phenomena are represented. For Tsukamoto, the images of a body traumatised by metal and haunted by his own double are symptomatic of the modern, technological city in which he lived at the time and of the period, although it is interesting to note that many of the films' animations are confined to garages and factory units, more in keeping with the cyberpunk culture very much prevalent in the late 1980s, associated with what David Ketterer describes as 'high tech low life' (1992), the breakdown of social cohesion and marginalisation in which a new world order is sought. Švankmajer's animation, by contrast, is clearly informed by his continued support for the Surrealist movement and proclaimed connection to his inner child; at the same time, it invokes a wider, disturbing context that relates to his upbringing in war-torn Czechoslovakia and, later, as a burgeoning filmmaker, subject to intense surveillance and censure from an overbearing Communist regime. In that context, the desire for freedom and liberation is comprehensible, as is relief through gallows humour.

The work of the Quay Brothers is informed by genetics: their status as twins manifests itself in the mirroring and duplication enacted at times by their puppets, the matching of movements suggestive of two souls eternally joined. Interestingly, their animated characters rarely if ever speak: there is almost an unspoken synergy between them, as demonstrated by the man who imagines himself to be a tram in *Nocturna Artificialia*, or the way interactions take place without conversation in *Street of Crocodiles*, which is an unexpected invocation of

uncanniness through silence. It is a category to which Freud refers, alongside solitude and darkness, as ‘connected with infantile anxiety, something that most of us never overcome’ (2003, p.159). Stop motion’s depictions of movement, and the transmission of thoughts, is relied upon to communicate the fears and desires of the stop motion characters in their films. The identity of the twins is also inversely, uncannily expressed in their depictions of solitude, where a figure is left to wander alone, or is shown repeatedly running through the same motions in a display of mania or frustration. Solitude is a strange and frightening prospect for a twin that connotes images of loss, like using a part of the body, and, certainly, those associated with death.

This thesis has consistently demonstrated that intertextuality offers a stronger, more cohesive argument for how stop motion and the uncanny interact with dark themes and traditions. It is, after all, their starting point: ‘The Uncanny’ is a concept first formally articulated through a written essay, and stop motion is a visual subtype of filmmaking. No form of art is created in a cultural vacuum, and it is asserted that there is sufficient evidence in the research presented here to demonstrate that an argument is enriched by context, and by identifying works in other media that interrogate similar themes, and with analogous sensibilities. They can often inform and embellish our understanding of the way meaning is created. In this essay I have looked to a wide variety of writers, theorists and filmmakers who speak to the same concerns in their work, and with recognisably similar voices. Aside from Freud and the stop motion animators already identified these include John Milton, Edgar Allan Poe, Stanislaw Lem, David Cronenberg, Bruno Schulz and, of course, Georges Bataille. Some of them have inspired the work of the directors included here, while I have intuited the presence of the others and recognised that they coalesce at points in their thinking and demonstrate it through their chosen forms of communication.

It is darkness that, ultimately unites them all, the darkness that is visible in the primal and childhood fears which come back to haunt us in the various guises of the uncanny, and which stop motion articulates through techniques associated with clay animation, object animation, puppetry and pixilation, its increments and visible joins revealing that which was thought to be hidden and 'has come into the open' (2003, p.132). Endings are not an uncanny manifestation, despite the presence of death in its various forms. It is the collision with life that engenders uncanniness. I am satisfied to defer to Freud for the last word, and conclude, as he seems to, that all things end in the unresolvable ambiguity of darkness.

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