

*Edgar Allan Poe + the Marquis de Sade
+ Jan Svankmajer = Lunacy*

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A satirical masterpiece!”**

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animated sequences.”**

–Manohla Dargis, THE NEW YORK TIMES



Lunacy

a film by Jan Svankmajer

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It's wrong to understand a film solely through its maker's words, but since the very substance of *Lunacy* is error—psychological, physiological, metaphysical, pataphysical—I may as well screw up from the start by quoting Jan Svankmajer's onscreen introduction. He stands before you in a conspicuously empty space, a white-haired, white-bearded man of mournful countenance, and speaks over a faint clatter. It sounds like sprockets passing through a cogwheel. Did the crew fail to muffle the camera's noise? Or is somebody, somewhere, running an old 16-millimeter projector?

"What you are about to see," Svankmajer says, apparently oblivious to the interference, "is a horror film, with all the degeneracy peculiar to that genre. It is not a work of art. Today, art is all but dead anyway." That being the case, "our film may be regarded as an infantile tribute to the works of Edgar Allan Poe, from which it takes certain themes and images, and to the Marquis de Sade, to whom it owes its blasphemy and subversion." As if distracted, Svankmajer looks down at his feet. A severed tongue is creeping energetically across the wooden floorboards, bunching itself like an inchworm. Svankmajer, unfazed, goes on. "In essence, our story concerns a philosophical debate over how best to run a lunatic asylum," or something. Do you think I can write this all down? I know I've botched some of it, but the basic idea is this: While one side in the debate argues for complete freedom and the other advocates control and punishment, either way is better than the method of having both at once, as we do in "the madhouse we live in today."

Having survived two-thirds of twentieth-century Czech history, Svankmajer is entitled to make such judgments. But he's already gone, and in his place we see the hanging carcass of a pig—a very, very long pig—which splits open at the top with a zipping, slurping, ripping sound. Guts spill out in profusion, and as the camera pans down along the pink flesh the gash continues to open, as if sliced by vision itself, while more and more intestines tumble forward in a squiggly pile.

Our story begins:

No, to tell the story would be an even worse mistake than repeating Svankmajer's explanation. Better to stick to details. *Lunacy* takes place simultaneously in today's Central Europe—where there are cheap bluejeans, broken computers, exhaust-spewing passenger vans and light bulbs with a yellowish cast—and in a late-eighteenth-century France of horse-

drawn carriages, powdered wigs, cocked hats and candlelight. The protagonist, a youngish fellow named Jean Berlot (Pavel Liska), travels about with a cloth bag slung over his shoulder and a broken-toothed comb in his pocket—a keepsake from his dead mother—with which he sometimes tugs at his dark and wiry hair. His eyes are slitlike and timid, his overbite pronounced, his cheeks grubbily stubbled, his stance apologetic. It takes just one direct glance from a pretty woman—such as lithe, red-headed Charlota (Anna Geislerová), first glimpsed at a country inn—for a fool like this to fall in love.

For the first half of *Lunacy*, though, Jean gets only a few more intermittent looks at Charlota. Mostly he's ensnared by the Marquis (Jan Tríska), a square-jawed old dandy given to consil-baring outbursts of laughter and eloquent, vituperative monologues. He can be soothing and generous, too, or at least he can seem so, since a weak character such as Jean needs to be kept and controlled by kindness, sometimes, instead of loud intimidation and the waving of antique pistols. The "blasphemy and subversion" that Svankmajer mentions in his introduction? The Marquis shows Jean plenty of that, once he's taken the stray home. The pranks include a black mass in which large portions of chocolate cake (or is it some other brown, gooey stuff?) substitute for the wafer, and the kiss of fellowship is replaced by a rite that involves Charlota's bare buttocks.

There are sudden knocks in the night, in his dreams, that terrify Jean.

Without pausing to recount the premature burial, I will go on to say that the second half of *Lunacy* is a dramatization—some drama!—of Poe's tale "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether." Clucking chickens and cackling gowned patients swarm chaotically through the grandiose old building where Jean now finds himself voluntarily confined, in a lunatic asylum where "art therapy" entails the flinging of paint at a mute naked woman and Charlota shows up again as a nurse, or maybe a prisoner, or perhaps (if the Marquis is to be believed) a devious nymphomaniac who likes it kinky with the superintendent. The patients keep ripping open the pillows, so the air is always thick with feathers, as well as poultry.

So much for the live action. In between these scenes, as punctuation or commentary or a form of higher dramatization, are sequences of the stop-motion animation for which Svankmajer is most famous. Scored to a

hurdy-gurdy waltz, these segments feature writhing lumps of meat, skittering brains, excitedly rolling eyeballs, extremely loose tongues, all living busy lives of their own. They slide through windows and down dank dungeon walls, copulate on surgical tables, shoot at targets, grow explosively within cages, invade bleached animal skulls, hatch from eggs, hurry up the sides of a grinder and spurt out again in wormlike strands to be pecked by chickens. The effect, as advertised, is horrific (especially when Svankmajer cuts to a sudden, emphatic close-up) but also funny and always appropriate, in a way you wouldn't care to explain.

Perhaps history is a nightmare from which meat is trying to awake. Or meat is the nightmare from which history wants to awake. I know this much: When the Marquis stages a celebratory *tableau vivant* of Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, populated by asylum inmates and starring a bare-bosomed Charlota, the lunatic crouching by her ankles can restrain himself only so long before he leaps to her right breast, mouthing it as avidly as if it were meat. Jean intervenes strongly; he insists that humans have souls, and women must be respected. But it's not clear whether Charlota at this point regards Jean as a savior, a chump or a spoilsport.

I know this, too: After the Marquis's riot of liberty comes the violence of order. There is regime change. We learn why severed tongues have been crawling on the floor, and we may remember that Svankmajer knows, from experience, about people who are kept silent for their own good.

I cannot call *Lunacy* a masterpiece. The category can mean nothing unless an artist aspires to it, and this film, by Svankmajer's reckoning, isn't art at all. So maybe I should quote Frank Zappa, a foreigner who has been admired in Prague, who once remarked that his recordings were not so much music as "a useful household product." Fine. *Lunacy* will scour cant from your mental walls, unclog grimy sentiment from the drain of your heart, put the shine back on those scuffed eyes and ears, and leave your whole earthly domicile smelling as fresh as ground chuck.

Line up outside New York's Film Forum—and then other theaters nationwide—starting August 9. Want more? Last year Kino on Video and KimStim released a DVD anthology of Svankmajer's shorts, and they will release an equally mad disc of Jiri Barta's animations come September.