



# THE QUAY BROTHERS

a retrospective



a Zeitgeist Films release

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## ◊ a retrospective ◊

To coincide with the theatrical release of *THE PIANO TUNER OF EARTHQUAKES*, Zeitgeist Films presents a thirteen-film retrospective of shorts by famed twin animators the Quay Brothers. Two of the world's most original filmmakers, identical twins Stephen and Timothy Quay have been making their unique blend of puppetry and stop-motion animation for nearly 30 years and have spawned an enormous cult following. The Quays display a passion for detail, a breathtaking command of color and texture, and an uncanny use of focus and camera movement that make their films unique and instantly recognizable.

Best known for their classic 1986 film *STREET OF CROCODILES*, which filmmaker Terry Gilliam recently selected as one of the ten best animated films of all time, they are masters of miniaturization and on their tiny sets have created an unforgettable world, suggestive of a landscape of long-repressed childhood dreams.

Zeitgeist is proud to present most of these extraordinary films in brand-new theatrical prints (freshly struck by the British Film Institute).

The Quay Brothers Retrospective will include some or all of the following films, depending on the venue:

*Nocturna Artificialia* (1979)

*The Cabinet of Jan Svankmajer* (1984)

*This Unnameable Little Broom (or The Epic of Gilgamesh)* (1985)

*Street of Crocodiles* (1986)

*Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies* (1987)

*Dramolet (Stille Nacht I)* (1988)

*The Comb (From the Museums of Sleep)* (1991)

*De Artificiali Perspectiva or Anamorphosis* (1991)

*Are We Still Married? (Stille Nacht II)* (1991)

*Tales from Vienna Woods (Stille Nacht III)* (1992)

*Can't Go Wrong Without You (Stille Nacht IV)* (1993)

*In Absentia* (2000)

*The Phantom Museum* (2003)



## THE QUAY BROTHERS

The extraordinary Quay Brothers are two of the world's most original filmmakers. Identical twins who were born in Pennsylvania in 1947, Stephen and Timothy Quay studied illustration at the Philadelphia College of Art before going on to the Royal College of Art in London in the early 1970s, where they started to make animated short films. Whilst at the Royal College the brothers met Keith Griffiths who, since *NOCTURNA ARTIFICIALIA* (1979), has been their producer and co-founder of their studio Atelier Koninck.

Influenced by a tradition of Eastern European animation, the Quays display a passion for detail, a breathtaking command of color and texture, and an uncanny use of focus and camera movement that make their films unique and instantly recognizable. Best known for their classic 1986 film *STREET OF CROCODILES*, which filmmaker Terry Gilliam recently selected as one of the ten best animated films of all time, they are masters of miniaturization and on their tiny sets have created an unforgettable world, suggestive of a landscape of long-repressed childhood dreams. In 1994, with *INSTITUTE BENJAMENTA*, they made their first foray into live-action feature-length filmmaking.

The Quays have also directed pop promos for His Name is Alive, Michael Penn, Sparklehorse, 16 Horsepower, and Peter Gabriel (contributing to his celebrated "Sledgehammer" video), and have also directed ground-breaking commercials for, among others, MTV, Nikon, Murphy's beer and Slurpee.

The Quays' work also includes set design for theatre and opera. In 1998 their Tony-nominated set designs for Ionesco's *The Chairs* won great acclaim on Broadway.

In 2000 they made *IN ABSENTIA*, an award-winning collaboration with Karlheinz Stockhausen, as well as two dance films, *DUET* and *THE SANDMAN*. In 2002 they contributed an animated dream sequence to Julie Taymor's film *FRIDA*.

In 2003 the Quays made four short films in collaboration with composer Steve Martland for a live event at the Tate Modern in London, and in 2005 premiered their second feature film, *THE PIANO TUNER OF EARTHQUAKES*, at the Locarno Film Festival. *THE PIANO TUNER...* will be released on November 17 in New York before playing around the country.

# THE FILMS



## NOCTURNA ARTIFICIALIA

1979, 21 minutes, color, 16mm NEW PRINT

Music by Stefan Cichonski

A dreamer is seduced by the mystery of the city at night. He leaves his room and goes into the street, where a tram-car carries him away. “As with much of their later work, it’s impossible to provide a coherent synopsis of the earliest surviving film by the Quay Brothers, as *Nocturna Artificialia* defies attempts at verbal encapsulation at every turn. The Quays themselves acknowledged this when they said “as for what is called the scenario, at most we have only a limited musical sense of its trajectory, and we tend to be permanently open to vast uncertainties, mistakes, disorientations, as though lying in wait to trap the slightest fugitive ‘encounter’.”... Shot on 16mm and funded by the British Film Institute’s Production Board, *Nocturna Artificialia* is a remarkably confident piece of work, the Quays surmounting obvious technical and budgetary limitations to create a private universe entirely out of their own recurring obsessions. Their later films may be more assured, but their roots are clearly visible here.” –Michael Brooke



## THE CABINET OF JAN SVANKMAJER

1984, 14 minutes, color, 16mm NEW PRINT

Music by Zdenek Liska

The film is structured as a series of little lessons in perception, taught by a puppet simulacrum of Svankmajer, whose head is an opened book, to a doll whose head the master empties of dross and refills with a similar open book. Each of the nine segments or chapters “refers variously to the importance of objects in Svankmajer’s work, their transformation and bizarre combination through specifically cinematic techniques, the extraordinary power of the camera to ‘make strange’, the influence of Surrealism on Svankmajer’s work, and the subversive and radical role of humor. Taken out of the context of the original *Visions* television documentary on Svankmajer, for which they served as illustration/commentary, these vignettes might at first sight seem a trifle bewildering. They ideally need to be viewed more than once before they begin to work effectively as quirky introductions to the Svankmajer universe. Then, however, they emerge as surprisingly charming and delightful excursions into this astonishing (and often deeply disturbing) directors work.” –Julian Petley



## THIS UNNAMEABLE LITTLE BROOM

or THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

1985, 11 minutes, color, 16mm NEW PRINT

Music by R. Walter

This was originally conceived as a pilot for a series, which never materialized due to lack of funding. Alternative title: *Little Songs of the Chief Officer of Hunar Louse (Being a Largely Disguised Reduction of the Epic of Gilgamesh)*, *Tableau II*, “in which Gilgamesh sends a prostitute to seduce the wild man of the forest, Enkidu. The Gilgamesh figure is a sort of grotesque fascist hydrocephalic child despot on a tricycle, ruthless patrolling his sandbox kingdom. Enkidu, made from a bird skull adorned with an exotic headdress of feathers and shells, brings to mind Max Ernst’s renowned collage series *Une Semaine de Bonté*. The wicked child sets a devilish trap for the creature – a goblet of raw flesh to lure him, and then a mechanical trapdoor in the shape of a vulva...it is strong stuff, a waking nightmare of paranoia and sexual violence. The camerawork is frenetic, yet the effect is precisely that convergence of the dreamlike and the mythic, the bizarre and the inevitable that all their work aspires to.”

–J.D. McClatchy



## STREET OF CROCODILES

1986, 21 minutes, color and b&w, 35mm NEW PRINT

Music by Leszek Jankowski

Adapted from a short story by Polish writer Bruno Schulz, the Quays’ first film in 35mm, and their first masterpiece, delves deep into a nightmarish netherworld. A museum keeper spits into the eye-piece of an ancient peep-show and sets the musty machine going. Inside the puppets partake in a series of bizarre rituals among the dust and the grime.

“On display in a deserted provincial museum is an old viewing Kinetoscope machine with a map indicating the precise district of the Street of Crocodiles. Lodged deep within this wooden oesophagus lie the internal configurations and mechanisms of the Street of Crocodiles like some quasi-anatomical exhibit. The anonymous offering of human saliva by an attendant caretaker activates and releases the Schulzian theatre from stasis into permanent flux. Myth stalks the streets of this parasitical zone where the mythological ascension of the everyday is charted by a marginal interloper who threads himself through this one night of the Great Season. No centre can be reached and the futile pursuit concludes in the deepest rear rooms of a slightly dubious tailor’s shop.” –The Quay Brothers



## REHEARSALS FOR EXTINCT ANATOMIES

1987, 14 minutes, b&w, 35mm

Music by Leszek Jankowski

In the fragile immobility of a room a couple wait, as twilight advances, alternately oblivious to and made anxious by presentiments of some brutal destruction being remorselessly rehearsed outside their door. Loosely inspired by an etching by Fragonard.



## THE COMB (FROM THE MUSEUMS OF SLEEP)

1990, 18 minutes, color and b&w, 35mm NEW PRINT

Music by Leszek Jankowski

*The Comb* opens in the shadowy bedroom of a sleeping beauty and seems to enter her mind and burrow into her dreams. Based on a fragment of text by the Austrian writer Robert Walser, *The Comb* is an exploration of the subconscious visualized as a labyrinthine playhouse haunted by a doll-like explorer. A mesmerizing and resonant blend of live action and animation, *The Comb* is set to a sensuous score of violins, guitars and attic room cries and whispers, and bathed in a gorgeous golden glow.



## DE ARTIFICIALI PERSPECTIVA *or* ANAMORPHOSIS

1991, 15 minutes, color, 35mm NEW PRINT

Music by Leszek Jankowski

The Quays' interest in esoteric illusions finds its perfect realization in this fascinating animated lecture on the art of *anamorphosis*. This artistic technique, often used in the 16th- and 17th centuries, utilizes a method of visual distortion with which paintings, when viewed from different angles, mischievously revealed hidden symbols.

## The *Stille Nacht* series



### STILLE NACHT I – DRAMOLET

1988, 1 minute, b&w, 35mm

Music: La Voz de Drohobycz performed by the Blata Gimnazjum Children's Orchestra

A dazzling fugue of iron filings that was made as an Art Break for MTV.



### STILLE NACHT II – ARE WE STILL MARRIED?

1992, 3 1/2 minutes, b&w, 35mm NEW PRINT

Music by His Name is Alive

A three-minute animated choreography with an ethereal pop soundtrack by the remarkable band called “His Name Is Alive”. With a typically eccentric cast of a ragged doll, a white rabbit and a manic ping-pong ball, the Quays construct a hypnotic, beguiling, and vaguely menacing ballet—something like a music video made by Max Ernst. In beautifully textured black & white, *Are We Still Married?* is a small work, but it is as accomplished and unforgettable as their very best.



### STILLE NACHT III

#### TALES FROM VIENNA WOODS

1993, 3 1/2 minutes, b&w, 35mm

The third in the *Stille Nacht* cycle, *Tales From Vienna Woods* was also made with the intention of exploring imagery that they planned to develop further in their first feature *Institute Benjamenta*, which was then in limbo awaiting funds. In fact, so close were the short and the feature in terms of overall tone (despite the one being animated and the other live-action) that the former was subsequently recycled as the latter's theatrical trailer, in a slightly but not significantly modified form.

—excerpted from [screenonline.org.uk](http://screenonline.org.uk)



### STILLE NACHT IV

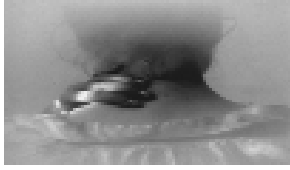
#### CAN'T GO WRONG WITHOUT YOU

1994, 3 1/2 minutes, b&w, 35mm NEW PRINT

Music by His Name is Alive

Following their collaboration the previous year with *Are We Still Married?*, the Quays reunited with His Name Is Alive to create the video for their 1993 single “Can't Go Wrong Without You.” Very consciously a sequel to the earlier video, this recapitulates many of its central Lewis Carrollian motifs: the girl with constantly expanding and contracting height (an effect enhanced here by standing her on scales, her weight fluctuating in time with her changing size), the paddle decorated with the image of a heart and a pair of eyes, the rabbit, and recurring impressions of keys, locks and dark, mysterious secrets.

—excerpted from [screenonline.org.uk](http://screenonline.org.uk)



## IN ABSENTIA

2000, 20 minutes, b&w and color, 35mm NEW PRINT

Music by Karlheinz Stockhausen

The first new film by the Quay Brothers in the five years since *Institute Benjamenta*, *In Absentia* is a collaboration with the celebrated avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, who composed and conducted original music for the film.

Shot in black and white and color and projected in CinemaScope, *In Absentia* combines live action and animation with dazzling use of light to convey the mindscape of a woman alone in a room repeatedly writing a letter with broken off pieces of pencil lead. The film is dedicated to “E.H. who lived and wrote to her husband from an asylum.”

*In Absentia*, which premiered in Directors’ Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival, was produced by Keith Griffiths at Koninck for the BBC and Pipeline Films’ series of short music films “Sound on Film International.” (The series included films by Hal Hartley on Louis Andriessen, Nicolas Roeg on Adrian Utley of Portishead, and Werner Herzog on John Tavener).

“The night’s one unqualified success was *In Absentia*, from the Brothers Quay and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Ostensibly, the visuals were typical Quay: a mix of animation, live action and shadow-show sketching out a vestigial narrative about a woman obsessively writing letters in an asylum. But the violence of the music—with harsh, intense swathes of synthesiser and screeching organ—brought out extreme new tonalities in the Quays’ imagery, especially in the swells and blasts of white light, in retina-scorching digital projection. This dazzling piece of work, I suspect, was the only one of these collaborations that will have a life of its own outside the programme.” —Jonathan Romney, *The Guardian*



## THE PHANTOM MUSEUM

2003, 12 minutes, b&w and color, Betacam

Music by Gary Tarn

Random forays into one of the world’s most extraordinary museum collections: Sir Henry Wellcome’s unique trove of medical curiosities. With their customary dexterity and affinity for the arcane, the Quay Brothers imaginatively document this unique assemblage and bring it hauntingly to life.

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