

CONSPIRATORS OF
PLEASURE
(SPIKLENCI SLASTI), 1996
83min.
Director: JAN SVANKMAJER
b. 1934



In one website devoted to this Czech animator, he is called “an alchemist of the Surreal” [see <http://www.illumin.co.uk/svank/>]. He has been making films since 1964. In the early 1950s Svankmeyer studied at the College of Applied Arts in Prague where he apparently had his first encounter with Surrealism (a friend gave him a copy of Karel Teige’s *A World Which Smells*). He later studied at the Prague Academy of Performing Arts, specializing in puppetry. In most of his work he mixes 3-D stop motion animation, puppets, and live action. Between 1968-1989 the distribution of his films was curtailed or restricted because his grotesque style and surrealist perspective was seen as politically problematic during the Soviet era in Czechoslovakia. His work was never banned but he had difficulties gaining access to the state-run studios and facilities at this time. A number of his films were written in the 1960s and 1970s (again, because of the political climate) but not realized until much later.

This was the case of *Conspirators of Pleasure* (1996), his third feature that has been termed “a grotesque black comedy about six ‘erotic hobbyists’ in search of the ultimate sexual fantasy.” Svankmayer says, “the basis of this particular film is eroticism.” It is also about obsession and the isolation that obsession can create. It is transgressive and perhaps, disturbing. One strategy for viewing would be to employ a kind of “automatic writing” to keep track of your own reactions and thoughts as the film progresses. *Conspirators of Pleasure* is mainly a live action film but one in which this filmmaker employs his interest in stop-action, special effects and puppetry in very specific ways. How does he blend these disparate stylistic choices?

He has named many inspirations for his highly original work. These include Edgar Allan Poe, Lewis Carroll, Horace Walpole, Luis Buñuel, Federico Fellini and Franz Kafka. One strategy for viewing *Conspirators of Pleasure* could be the consideration of his influences (at least the one’s familiar to you). There are a number of Svankmayer short animated films in the Evergreen collection if you wish to study more of his work.

“In our civilization, the dream, that natural wellspring of the imagination, is constantly blocked, and in its place we find absurdity which grants precedence to our *scientific, rational system.*”

-Jan Svankmajer, interview with Amos Vogel in *Film Comment*, 1988.



BETTY BOOP'S MAY PARTY, 1933

Directed by Dave Fleischer, Produced by Max Fleischer

The Fleischer Brothers founded a studio of animation in 1921 called Out of the Inkwell Films. Later renamed Fleischer Studios, it became one of the most innovative animation centers in the world, further developing the rotoscope, combining animation and live action, and exploring the art of clay animation.

Animated characters developed by the Fleischers included Koko The Clown (1917), Betty Boop (1931), Popeye The Sailor Man (1933, created in 1929 by Elzie Segar), and the first animated Superman.

The Fleischers were best known for two types of narrative structures:

1. the use of **unconnected gags with surprise endings** (an example of this would be *Betty Boop M.D.* in which Betty, Bimbo and Koko sell a cure-all elixir called Jippo. One customer drinks it and starts a rhythmic sputtering and all join in. The sputterer gets close up to the camera and turns into the classic image of Frederic March as Mr. Hyde.)
2. the **surrealistic mystery drama**. (One of the best of this style was *Bimbo's Initiation*. One animation scholar called it a bad dream and that's exactly what it was. Bimbo is walking down a street and falls into a manhole where he is accosted by a group of hooded members of the mystic order of the *Hoom cooka hotcha*. Each has a lit candle on his head and is spouting the words, "Wanna be a member?" over and over to which Bimbo always replies, "NO!" That is until Betty, whom at this point has dog ears, asks coyly, "Wanna be a member?" to which he replies "Yessss!" and is led into a room filled with four rows of identical Betty Boops stacked one on top of the other.) You get the idea!

How does *Betty Boop's May Day Party* fit into our study of Surrealism and Film? Please do a little writing in your film journal before you view today's feature presentation (see other side of this sheet for film notes).