

The Feel of the House of Usher: Jan Svankmajer's Tactile Affect

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Animated Affect in *The Fall of the House of Usher* (Jan Svankmajer, 1980) via [criticalcommons.org](https://www.criticalcommons.org)

Anxiety, nausea, dejection, arousal or fear: what do I feel about Jan Svankmajer's film *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1980).¹ How can adjectives describing emotions and psycho-somatic states express the film's sensory impact? Why are the senses limited to five, with sight given primacy? Can visual images and audible sounds convey tactile sensations? How can touch produce thoughts as well as feelings and what kind of thoughts are they? Is "viewing" a valid term for my experience of this intensely tactile event? Does a cohesive viewer actually exist, or am "I" a "centre of indetermination", the cluster of fluctuating affects, percepts and concepts of Gilles Deleuze's film-philosophy?²

This account will not offer definitive answers, but a tentative reflection on my encounter with this short, animated film, informed by the schizoanalytic insights of Deleuze and by Svankmajer's work on the tactile imagination. *Usher* is an affective event experienced by "my" shifting singularity in assemblage with it. For Henri Bergson, seminal to Deleuze's thinking, affect is a qualitative feeling, an "intensive vibration" on a "sensible nerve"³ or, as Deleuze puts it, a "motor effort on an immobilised receptive

plate.”⁴ Cinematic images of touch are “tactisigns” which express “a touching which is specific to the gaze.”⁵ Tactility in film is an intensive sensation of touch made possible if “the hand relinquishes its prehensile and motor functions to content itself with a pure touching.”⁶

As well as producing images of touch, Svankmajer also analysed them in collaboration with artist Eva Svankmayerova. In 1970s Prague, when prevented from filmmaking by Soviet ideological policing, they worked with fellow surrealists on experiments with the tactile imagination in dreams, erotica and childhood memories. They produced tactile imagery and analysed its affective phenomena.⁷ Svankmayer’s tactile imagination is based on touch as the most crucial of the senses. He describes his own tactile obsession via a kind of “becoming-hand,” as Deleuze might say. Svankmajer tells us:

I am a hand. And a hand is a tool. I am, therefore, a tool [...] I am a victim of tactilism [...] a hand with six fingers with webs in between. Instead of fingernails I have petite, sharp, sweet-toothed little tongues with which I lick the world.⁸

Yet, like Deleuze with tactisigns, Svankmajer asserted that the crucial organs of touch were not the hands but “the ‘passive’ parts of our bodies, and their connections to the entire surface, cavities, internal organs and mucous membranes, which act as a link to our most intensive sensory experience.”⁹ In 1980, when a relative “thaw” allowed him to film “classic” literary adaptations, he turned to Poe’s “psychological studies of pathological behaviour,” where touch “at times of psychic strain becomes hugely amplified.”¹⁰

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the visual mastery of establishing shots is refused from the start. The film’s world is spatially closed in and close-up, to focus sensory attention on enlarged details and exaggerated textures, while black and white film stock reduces the more extensive stimulus of colour. External locale is minimal, just a few brief location shots. The milieu for such vivid tactile events is kept deliberately vague: a conical tower briefly glimpsed in mist, a weed-choked tarn and bare-branched trees. One result of this spatial enclosure is to stretch the sense of time so that this short film’s fifteen minutes running time is experientially much longer. As Bergson suggests, time can be intensive not extensive, becoming Aeon (duration) not Chronos (clock-time).¹¹

The film’s main sequences alternate between animation and hand-held tracking shots. The camera moves through self-opening doors into dim passageways where shadows throw objects into relief and the gleam of reflective surfaces sharpens sensation. The fluid camera tracks deeper into the house, penetrating its texture by extreme close-up.

The grain of wood, peeling paint and lichen-stained walls blur matter in a textural mix. Extreme close-up prepares for the intensive impact of animation. Like the building, these shots are not “for” humans, but map a vivid sensational milieu of an autonomous material world.

Voice-over extracts from Poe’s tale, read at low volume, act as a subtle evocation of and ironical counterpoint to the visual images (word/image incongruity is a “classic” Surrealist device).¹² The voice evokes a “dull, dark and soundless” day in a “dreary track of country”, yet we hear haunting violin notes. The narrator’s invisible approach is reduced to the prints of his horse’s hoofs in the muddy ground.¹³ Rather than depicting human characters, Svankmajer shows only traces of their movements, a rocking chair or a closing door. As Poe writes, characters are “altered” indeed. Only Roderick’s empty chair commands attention. Its gleaming wood and elaborate curves present a singular thing-world with more substance and vitality than humans. Poe’s fascinated description of Roderick’s face is shifted by Svankmajer to the chair, which becomes memorable instead. The director’s characters have attained the condition of what Deleuze calls “becoming imperceptible”, the ultimate goal of a series of becomings that move away from the rigid entity “man”. Deleuze exemplifies this by the exhilarating ambivalence of “terror, but also great joy” found in H.P. Lovecraft’s fiction, when Randolph Carter abandons his subjective ego to become-infinite, via “molecular-becoming, imperceptible-becoming.”¹⁴

The film’s textured cinematography and claymation destabilizes divisions of inside and out, human and object. Usher’s “superstitious impressions” about the mansion’s sentience are literalised by animated sequences of cracking plaster and writhing mud, which furls and unfurls. Fast-motion makes us feel the dampness of a dark stain seeping across plaster and the violent impact of rock-like balls impelling themselves through windows. In Poe’s ethereal poem, “The Haunted Palace,” “[b]anners yellow, glorious, golden on its roof did float and flow, but this literary grandeur is deflated as Svankmajer’s mud balls gleefully expose their inner abjection. The shadowy gloom of Poe’s “[e]vil things in robes of sorrow” is materialised grossly by fingers of mud prodding themselves erect and squirming like maggots. Poe’s “discordant melody” becomes the hardly audible chords of Usher’s guitar. The “hideous throng” that “laugh but smile no more” is parodied by clay, fingered into labia that open and shut before melting into lumpy mush, a nauseating effect intensified by reverse footage.¹⁵ Svankmajer details how his intense engagement in working the clay was a tactile analogue to Usher’s psychological struggles, producing “a kind of “tense interpretation” of the poem [...] applying a brake on the tension amplified these emotions, they became cumulative, even leading to cramping of the fingers [which] led to considerable mental exhaustion.”¹⁶

Svankmajer expresses Usher's belief in the "sentience of all vegetable things," via highly textured, extreme close-ups of knobby trees with whorls and knots. Usher's extension of feeling to the "kingdom of inorganisation" centres on the shifting "collocation of stones" in walls mirrored by the undulating swamp of the tarn. This is analogous to how Deleuze and Guattari regard the fictional world of Carlos Castaneda, which "appears supple, with holes in fulness, nebulas in forms, and flutter in lines" as phenomenal hallucinations include ripples, fringes and overlappings.¹⁷

Marks left by Svankmajer's hands, with clear indentations of fingers and palms, express his palpating of the clay, bringing it to life. The *effects*, not the acts, are presented, so we feel a more direct affect than through character identification. As the artist's fingers strive with the clay, the marks of their tormented effort evoke the living dead Madeleine Usher likewise scrabbling at her coffin lid with bare hands.

Madeleine's own mark is limited to a rough outline of a skull, a literal reduction of the human face to what Deleuze and Guattari call "white wall/black hole", a figure they use to dismantle signification and subjectivity.¹⁸ In *Cinema 1*, the face is also the epitome of the affection image. Defamiliarised by extreme close-up, or by non-human objects becoming "facialised," the face epitomises the "unextended" affection-image with its intensive qualities of "the pure affect, the pure expressed."¹⁹ Roderick's parallel defacialisation is evoked by a close-up brick wall, showing that the "luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out." We hear of, but do not see, the "stony rigidity" of Usher's body, as his "whole person shuddered" in a becoming-stone.

Madeleine remains imperceptible in the coffin which, impelled by her stolen élan vital, glides through an avenue of bare trees seen from the coffin's own point of view.²⁰ The coffin impels itself into the vault, while the scraping and banging of wood intensifies the uncanny impact. This sound is amplified as a clap of thunder when a storm breaks out. Coffin nails and a hammer on the lid are set in motion by the shaking of the coffin. An out-of-sequence shot of the coffin splintering serves to prefigure its later disintegration. Outside, tree roots put out wildly animated shoots in random directions in a literalisation of Deleuze and Guattari's hybrids of rhizome and arborescence.²¹ These emerging roots are match-cut with jagged lightning, the force of which brings inanimate objects into life. Twigs erect themselves from the undulating ground. A pair of dried roots engages in combat like stags' locked horns churning up the mud with violent energy. Cracks appear in the ground as the earth itself bursts open. Madeleine's name briefly etched on the wall suggests her simultaneous emergence from the tomb. Her subjectivity has been subsumed by the house and her rise from the grave inevitably brings it crashing down.

Tension mounts as Poe's spurious gothic yarn, "The Mad Trist of Launcelot Canning," is sidelined by the camera's focus on cracks in the ceiling as the house starts to split. For Deleuze, the crack is a figure of delirium and subjective dissolution. In the early stages of drug or alcohol addiction, for example, intoxicants produce a "silent, imperceptible crack" as "unique surface Event," which is "imperceptible, incorporeal, and ideational," at least in its early stages.²² Yet the crack's location is neither internal nor external but "at the frontier" between.²³ Cracks on the virtual plane can produce actual change. These literal cracks in the House of Usher express psychic disintegration in disturbed characters. Their affects also work on the "viewer" to split the carapace of ossified responses in a "shattering and bursting" that lets new feeling and thought emerge.²⁴

The coffin nails twist into maggot forms as we hear of Canning's door cracking and ripping as the "hollow-sounding wood reverberated." Svankmajer undermines our expectation by withholding sound at this point. Only later, when a gaping hole appears in the coffin, is the sound of wood tearing actually heard. Like water or autumn leaves, the mud swirls threateningly around Roderick's chair. The hammer splinters, then the coffin completely disintegrates to reveal only an empty space of grass, wood and shards.

Inside and out change places, as roots spread into the house and the walls burst open. Launcelot Canning's brass shield in the story drops with a "distinct, hollow, metallic and clangorous" sound, but this is muted by the soundtrack, which muffles the "sonsign" to intensify the tactisign. Madeleine's approach is heralded by a fast track upstairs and along the corridor, but the open door reveals only emptiness to Roderick's waiting chair.²⁵ The darkness beyond is intensified by a blood stain seeping through a muslin cerement. The last embrace of Roderick and Madeleine is elided by the heavy weight of stones jumping down as the house immolates itself in the tarn as the storm rages. Furniture drags itself outside only to sink into the primal ooze. The raven of the film's opening disintegrates in the final shot.

Affects operate in assemblage with percepts and concepts. My brief foray into these affective images of touch has reversed Svankmajer's own process in adapting Poe's tale, by my turning cinematic affect back into words and concepts. The molecular flux of affective images acts to dismantle outworn structures of feeling and thought, as new formations emerge from their own premature burial. Svankmajer's tactile imagination aims not just to visualise the sense of touch but to express and mobilise anti-totalitarian desire.

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Notes

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- ¹ *The Fall of the House of Usher* (Zánik domu Usher), directed by Jan Svankmajer, 1980.
- ² Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 59.
- ³ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 55-56.
- ⁴ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 66.
- ⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 12.
- ⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 12.
- ⁷ For details of these tactile experiments see Jan Svankmajer, *Touching and Imagining: An Introduction to Tactile Art* (London and New York: Tauris, 2014); Cathryn Vasseleu, "The Svankmajer Touch", *Animation Studies* 3 (2008). <http://journal.animationstudies.org/cathryn-vasseleu-the-svankmajer-touch/>
- ⁸ <http://www.awn.com/mag/issue2.3/issue2.3pages/2.3jacksonsvankmajer.html>.
- ⁹ Jan Švankmajer, *Hmat a Imaginace, Taktilní experimentace* (Touch and Imagination, Tactile Experimentation) 1974-1983. Prague: Kozoroh, 1994, 43, transl. in Vasseleu, "The Svankmajer Touch", 1.
- ¹⁰ Svankmajer, *Touching and Imagining*, xxi; xxii.
- ¹¹ In Bergson, *Matter and Memory*.
- ¹² Subtitled translation means that Poe's words gain greater impact for international audiences.
- ¹³ Tim White & J. Emmett Winn, "Jan Švankmajer's Adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe", *Kinema: a journal for film and audiovisual media* (2006). http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=400&feature#ViewNotes_22
- ¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 66. Becoming-molecular and becoming-imperceptible indicate a fluid and shifting subjective ego, vitally open to the world and able to form new, productive assemblages with others.
- ¹⁵ Tim White & J. Emmett Winn, "Jan Švankmajer's Adaptations."
- ¹⁶ Svankmajer, *Touching and Imagining*, 151.
- ¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone, 1988), 227-8.
- ¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 168.
- ¹⁹ Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 66; 103.

²⁰ These shots of trees from the coffin's point-of-view recall a comparable sequence of premature burial in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* 1932.

²¹ In Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

²² Gilles Deleuze, "Porcelain and Volcano", in *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, 155.

²³ Deleuze, "Porcelain and Volcano", 155.

²⁴ Deleuze, "Porcelain and Volcano", 155.

²⁵ Sonsigns refer to elements of sound in terms of their qualities rather than their meanings.