



# The Tactile Reconstruction of *The Fall of the House of Usher*

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**Abstract.** Czech director Jan Švankmajer's film adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's novel of the same name, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, combines the director's interpretation of the original literary text with his theoretical activity. As the first practice of tactile art advocacy in the field of cinema, the film has an important place in the director's creative career. In this film, the sense of touch is realised through the use of audio-visual techniques such as textured photography and stop-motion animation to create a world of unoccupied "things". The audiovisual tactile interpretation of the original is further completed by the visual interpretation of the film. The film's reconstruction of the original can be roughly divided into three steps: the establishment of the status of the sense of touch, the realisation of the audiovisual touch, and the tactile interpretation. The tactile reproduction and interpretation reveal the director's unique artistic concept and creative approach.

**Keywords:** Jan Švankmajer; *The Fall of the House of Usher*; Film Adaptation; Tactile art; Audiovisualized touch

## 1 Introduction

Jan Švankmajer's film creation from 1964 to 2022 shows consistency in style and presentation, forming a unique worldview. The stylistic features of his work, such as stylism and surrealism, are deeply marked by his experience and the surrealist group in which he were. Under the combined influence of real conditions, theoretical activities, and textual qualities, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (*Zánik domu Usherů*, 1980) became the first work in which Švankmajer's tactile world of cinema began to be constructed.

*Usher* reflects both the unprecedented attention given by the director to the sense of touch, a technique such as stop-motion animation in his previous theatre and film work, and the concepts and ideas he accumulated during the seven-year ban on filming. Thus, a study of Švankmajer and his claims for tactile art, starting with *Usher*, serves to make a big difference in a small way. In turn, touching can serve as a key into *Usher* and Švankmajer. The establishment of the status of touching as the main object of representation in this film is inextricably linked to the director's own experiences and theoretical activities.

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## 2 'Touch' as the Protagonist

As a film adaptation of a literary work, the film naturally carries a duality of creative subjects. The literary author Edgar Allan Poe hides behind the film's author Jan Švankmajer, and the original literary text forms the material and skeleton for the reconstruction of the image. On the one hand, the film preserves the narrative structure of the novel *The Fall of the House of Usher*, even allowing the voice-over reciting the original text to run throughout the film, highlighting the clear trajectory of the original text's functioning; On the other hand, the dislocation of sound and painting, and the absence of human figures in the film's audiovisualisation of the text remind the audience that the original text is retained as a complete skeleton, and that the reconstruction of its flesh and blood, as well as its movement, is still done by images. This duality of creative subjects reveals a tendency towards dialogue. Rather than simply relaying Poe's short stories to the viewer through an audiovisual translation, Švankmajer's interpretation of the original text is expressed through video.

There is a strong historical connection between the factors that led to the making of the film, including the choice of subject matter, the style, and the emergence of the special object of the haptic, a seven-year ban on filming that Švankmajer received in 1973 after he objected to censorship and refused to replace the TV reporter in *Castle of Otranto* (*Otrantský zámek*, 1973-79) with a comedian. During this time, he contemplated the suppression of imagination and the effects of censorship and the commodity economy on art, and through a series of theoretical activities and tactile experiments, he eventually developed a complete conception of art and a theory of creativity, known as Tactilism. Through an experiment called "The Restorer", Švankmajer believed that the sense of touch had full artistic potential: the experimenter assembled a "tactile object" from a number of objects according to his own interpretation of a picture of the restorer; The subjects perceived the objects only through tactile movements, formed impressions and associations, and then tried to identify the prototype picture among the given options. Although the final answers given by the subjects varied, they all formed an image and interpretation of the entire "tactile object" rather than individual elements. On this basis, Švankmajer argues that tactile memory can emerge as an emotional meaning actively evoked by light tactile stimuli or by tactile imagination, thus This makes tactile art communicative. Afterwards, he developed the idea of combining tactile art with his own film creations. As for the significance of touch in his artistic expression, the director has directly stated: "I worked deliberately on evoking these neglected or hidden tactile feelings and tried to enrich the emotional arsenal of filmic expression. to revive the general impoverishment of sensibilities in our civilization, the sense of touch can play an important part"<sup>7</sup>

In 1980, the ban expired. On the one hand, one of the conditions for the resumption of cinematography was that the director could not start shooting with an original theme. On the other hand, the experiments in hapticism carried out over a period of seven years boosted Švankmajer's theoretical activity and gave him the impulse to incorporate it into his film creations. As he puts it, "When opportunities to make animated films opened up again, I kept wondering how to utilize my tactile 'experiences' in them."<sup>7</sup> Using a hapticist perspective when choosing subjects to film adaptation, Švankmajer

found in Edgar Allan Poe's short stories that the tactile senses had a special significance for the expression of fear, a sentiment that, in turn, this mood temporarily removes the sense of touch from the practical function it serves on a daily basis, making it a means of stimulating the imagination: "In Poe's work I discovered what an enormous role touch played in his psychological studies of pathological behaviour. The sense of touch, which we are barely aware of in everyday life, at times of psychic strain becomes hugely amplified....."<sup>7</sup> For example, in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, the "bare, slimy, cold" touch of the stone walls, or the detailed description of the mould, rubble and cracks all over the house in the original novel, or Usher's paranoia that "he could wear only garments of certain texture"<sup>8</sup>, are not from the words to the tactile sensory experience, thus reflecting the sensitivity of an emotionally susceptible narrator to external stimuli.

Therefore, *Usher* throws away all the characters in the picture, and instead expresses the state and movement of the objects as tactile carriers. The audience can only recognise the state of the characters in certain passages from some iconic features and the sound and picture counterpoints, such as the chair corresponding to Usher and the coffin corresponding to Madeline, etc. More often than not, especially in passages where the spooky atmosphere is clearly intensified, this kind of correspondence can be seen. More often than not, especially in passages where the eerie atmosphere is clearly intensified, such correspondences seem vague or even untenable, such as when the cracked ground reveals the word "MADELINE" on its own, or when the iron nails are slowly twisted and writhing. The viewer is not informed of the objects shown in these images or of any predetermined witnesses; the film presents only pure objects. In these passages, the rational boundaries between the characters and even between the characters and the viewer are no longer clearly defined, leaving only the "hugely amplified" tactile sensation under "psychic strain".

From the director's own creative ideas and the audiovisual content of the film itself, it is clear that the protagonist of the original text, Roderick Usher, has merged with "I", Madeline, and even Usher's House, becoming a sensual cluster. The sense of touch becomes the potential protagonist of the film in Švankmajer's interpretation, which is the first step in the director's reconstruction of the original.

### 3 Realisation of Audiovisualised Haptics

After "touch" has been established as the main character of expression, how to make the audiovisual language of the film technically "translate" the original literature at the tactile level has become the main problem of film production. After all, the sense of touch is different from the visual and auditory senses on which cinema relies, and belongs to another set of sensory systems. Švankmajer was also aware that "film is, foremost, an audiovisual medium", so it would seem paradoxical to use it to represent the sense of touch. However, he did not intend to complete the "Tactile Cinema" conceived by Dalí, but tried to use the audio-visual language of cinema itself to convey to the audience the dramatically enlarged touch of Edgar Allan Poe's writing.

Deleuze also deals with related issues in writings such as *Cinema 2*. Referring to the sense of touch, he comes to almost the same conclusion as Švankmajer: “It is the tactile which can constitute a pure sensory image, on condition that the hand relinquishes its prehensile and motor functions to content itself with a pure touching.”<sup>5</sup> These are functions that Švankmajer calls “utilitarian activities of the sense of touch.” Though their focus varies, their conceptions of how touch can be represented in film draw on the physiology of the tactile senses, among other things. In *Touch and Imagination*, Švankmajer lists cases of pathology involving touch and hallucinations as examples of the existence of tactile imagination. In the case of the original, “for readers these sensations are second hand, not directly experienced with their own bodies”<sup>7</sup>. However, the existence of “tactile imagination” and “tactile memory”, previously demonstrated in experiments, offers the possibility of translating such second-hand sensations, allowing the reader or viewer to “re-creating them quite intensely” when receiving textual/audiovisual information. On this basis, the question of how audiovisualised haptics can be realised is transformed into the question of how they can be stimulated through audiovisual means.

The surrealist filming techniques that had already appeared in the director’s short films prior to 1980, and the innovations made to achieve audiovisual haptics in *Usher*, were used in Švankmajer’s subsequent work as the main means of constructing his hapticist images. In this film, these are textured photography, stop-motion animation, clay animation, and auditory guidance. With the help of these tools, Švankmajer realises the audiovisualisation of touch in *Usher*, and completes the second step of “reconstruction”, i.e. the translation of the original narrative.

### 3.1 Textural Photography

Textural photography is everywhere in this film. The film intentionally abandons the typical camera language, adopting a shooting technique based on close-ups and subjects that are basically composed entirely of objects; it abandons the colours of the image, adopting black-and-white film that highlights the tactile qualities of the objects’ surfaces such as materials and bumps more prominently. The texture of the objects naturally becomes an important part of the visual content of the film: the mottled surface of the door of the Usher’s House, the wooden texture of the wooden chairs, the grains of their lacquered surfaces in the light, the rough pits revealed by the unnatural etching of the wall coverings, etc.

Merleau-Ponty states, “rather than being absolutely separate, each of these qualities has an affective meaning which establishes a correspondence between it and the qualities associated with the other senses.”<sup>6</sup> Each property leads to those belonging to the other senses. This view profoundly influenced Švankmajer’s artistic outlook and creative activity. Close-up photography of the textures of objects not only draws visual attention closer to the microscopic level and establishes the intuition of sensory magnification, but also presents the different tactile sensations of the surfaces of these objects through visual differences. The visual sensitivity leads to the tactile nature of the objects, thus evoking the “tactile imagination” emphasised by the director.

### 3.2 Stop-motion Animation

The use of stop-motion animation comes a little more broadly in Švankmajer's creation. In this film, stop-motion animation is applied to objects such as tree roots, walls, windows, and other components of the Usher's House and Madeline's coffin, which are objects of special significance in the original narrative. Through the technique of frame-by-frame exposure, their positions and states are constantly altered, thus drawing on the evocative nature of the plastic arts to give the audience the illusion that the objects act autonomously. The second is the various "found objects" beloved by surrealist artists, which come from the real world, but due to various reasons no longer have daily practical functions, and are forgotten in the corners until they are "found" again by the film camera. until they are "found" again by the film camera. The director often uses "found objects" to create stop-motion animation in his creations, and in *Usher* they are mainly embodied in the various tools on Madeline's coffin: hammerheads, nails, keys, and so on. The nails wriggle and twist as the story of "Mad Trist" unfolds, transforming from hard, static metalwork into some kind of soft, malleable creature. This is reminiscent of the softened clocks in Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory*, as both draw on visual defamiliarization to stimulate the "tactile imagination".

### 3.3 "Claymation"

There's a part in this film which is Švankmajer's iconic claymation animation, complete with a counterpart to the original poem, *The Haunted Palace*. The clay forms that appear in Švankmajer's films are essentially presented alongside the dynamics given by stop-motion animation. Clay in the director's camera often takes on a vitality that is expressed through the material's integrated and fully malleable character as an individuality that belongs to the "clay creature" and is not subordinate to any of the objects it imitates. In its combination of shape and dynamics, it presents only a touch of clay, but this individuality gives the form great interpretive tension. This part of *Usher* will be discussed in more detail later.

### 3.4 Auditory Guidance

Sound, which plays a less direct and intense role in the tactile construction than the images, also serves in this film as a complement and enhancement, completing the representation of audiovisual touch, where the sense of hearing is given material form in response to changes in the shape of objects. Ambient sound effects, such as the sound of a horse's hooves imprinted in the sticky mud, the creaking of a wooden door's rotting shaft, and the pounding sound made by Madeline's coffin while she is trapped in the coffin, essentially form a counterpoint to the images, serving as a complement to the texture of the objects in the images, and evoking the viewer's tactile imagination. This technique has appeared in *Picnic with Weissmann* (*Picknick mit Weissmann*, 1968), where the regular friction sound of the singing needle as it scratches across a shell on the record frequently interrupts the music, causing an auditory and at the same time tactile imaginative interruption. As for the narrator's part, it does not seem to belong to

the “tactile” content. However, it is clear that it is a detached but participatory role in the film, acting as a spokesperson for the original literary text (basically a retelling of the text) and becoming the tangible skeleton of the film’s narrative, regulating and structuring the content of Švankmajer’s interpretation. Ignoring the literal meaning of the voice-over, in terms of its aural character, the varied intonation of the voice-over drives the rhythm of the visual presentation, which also constitutes the film’s aural guidance. Its role in this sense is to act as a kind of tour guide, guiding the viewer’s processing of the visual information with the direct emotional colouring of the “acoustic symbols”.

Therefore, according to the visual technique of triggering tactile imagination, the film can be roughly divided into three parts: conventional passage, stop-motion animation and clay animation. The three parts are interspersed, with auditory guidance running through the whole film, stimulating the audience’s tactile imagination and tactile memory, and finally completing the realisation of audiovisual touch.

#### 4 Interpretation through tactile realisation

As mentioned earlier, touch, as the potential protagonist of the film, are translated through audiovisual techniques. Next, this paper will explore how these audiovisualised haptics, based on Švankmajer’s interpretations, draw on the narrative of the original to express interests other than those of the original, i.e., how they “reconstruct” the original literary text. This requires a reading of the film from the point of view of the difference between visual and textual means of representation.

Firstly, the most intuitive and pervasive visual feature of *Usher* is the absence of “human” in the picture. This allows the camera to focus on the presence of objects. For example, the beginning of the film corresponds to the original’s “I” riding to visit Usher’s House with the hoofprints and undulating sound of hooves gradually appearing on the muddy ground. Another example is the meticulous description of the face of Usher when “I” first saw him after many years: “A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve .....”<sup>8</sup>, is translated in the film into multiple hand-held panning close-up shots of the armchair’s material construction and surface texture. As the audience’s attention sweeps over the tactile details of the armchair, it is as if they are gazing into the texture to restore the original “I”’s view of the face of Usher, and even further, slowly sweeping their hands over the face.

Although this “no man’s land” can also be found in other film works by Švankmajer, such as *Picnic with Weissmann* (1968) and *A Quiet Week in the House (Tichý týden v domě, 1969)*, the form and movement of the objects in *Usher* are clearly based on the highly charged emotional state of the characters in the story, and the movement of the objects is an echo of the human presence. It is an important feature of *Usher* that the characters played by humans do not appear in this film from beginning to end, but the representation is clearly a projection of humans and their senses. Rather than attempting to build a world from scratch, Švankmajer builds on the narrative and emotions of the

original literary text, reconstructing a hapticised version of it, a characteristic that Ewan Wilson describes as “an immersive environmental sculpture”<sup>3</sup>.

Secondly, the objects in *Usher* have two modes of existence: the everyday state and stop-motion animation. The surface of the aforementioned chair belongs to the everyday state of the object; it is being watched in a particular way, but there is nothing special about it in itself. The means of stop-motion animation, on the other hand, are equally common in this film, such as the peeling off of wallpaper, the moving of coffins, the twisting of iron nails, and the disintegration of a crow. Their common feature is that they go against the movement of the subject in everyday life, thus taking on a surreal state. Like the “tactile objects” mentioned earlier, the director combines multiple elements and gives them to the audience to recognise and interpret.

Due to the existence of stop-motion animation, the objects have taken on a life of their own in the image, not only separating themselves from the everyday attributes of stillness and utility, but also constituting a world of objects of their own accord. The relationships between objects correspond to the interpersonal relationships of the characters in the original film, creating “a vivid sensory environment”<sup>2</sup>. Objects in motion often retain appearances (the forked roots of a tree, the point of a nail, etc.) that were given to them for natural or practical purposes, but as “found objects” these appearances exist more as visual or tactile features (the tangle of roots, the twist of a nail, etc.). In this world, objects take on some of the characteristics and senses of humans, such as the skeletal faces revealed by peeling siding and what appears to be a view of trees in a moving coffin, which can be seen as projections of human emotions; at the same time, the objects retain enough of their original character that they cannot be seen as equivalent to humans. The viewer needs to accept this set of rules constructed by the director and re-establish his or her own perception of the objects in front of him or her, not interpreting them purely as props in the film but accepting, for the time being, the subjectivity they possess. At this point, the “tactile memory” awakened by the texture photography is not enough, the audience also needs to mobilise the “tactile imagination” to communicate with the surreal objects in the film, so that they can enter the worldview constructed through stop-motion animation in *Usher*.

Finally, the film’s restoration of the poem in the text, *The Haunted Palace*, is particularly noteworthy. The poem is important in Švankmajer’s interpretation because it “evokes the beginning of insanity”, as he sees it. In the film, Švankmajer uses clay-mation stop-motion animation (which appears particularly abruptly) to distinguish this section from the other two parts consisting of live-action footage of Usher’s house, giving it greater independence, and inserts a soundtrack of a different mood, with the guitar (the instrument Usher played in the original text) as the main instrument. Speaking about the process of creating this clay animation, Švankmajer emphasises the creative method of pressing tactile gestures into the clay, i.e. imprinting gestures that carry a certain emotion (strength of touch, frequency, gesture of the fingers, etc.) into the clay, thus fixing the emotion. The clear indentations of fingerprints and palm prints, the only direct traces of a “human being” that appear in the film, express a visualisation of the tactile sensation of the clay that brings it to life. Between the frame-by-frame exposures, the omitted repetitive shaping of the fingers points to the agonising struggle of Madeline Usher in her coffin in the original literary text, restoring for both the creator

and the viewer the continuous and intense tactile experience that the fingers felt during this process. In describing the sensations of this creative process, Švankmajer also refers to the exhaustion that such a “tense interpretation” brings to his body (mainly his fingers), as if he were re-experiencing the pain of the literary Madeline buried alive through the medium of clay, and then bringing it to the viewer. According to Vasseleu: “The results are fossilized impressions made by injections of emotional agitation that can pass directly into our own psyches and affect or animate us too, rather than being passive, representational artworks.”<sup>1</sup>

As clay animation has been a part of the director's career, it also informs the film's refinement of his general philosophy of art-making, which goes beyond the simply adaption of a single text. According to Švankmajer, the passage is “an analogy of an analogy”, meaning that it asks the viewer to participate in the interpretation. Take, for example, Anna Powell's interpretation of the reproduction of the image of the “hideous throg” that “laugh — but smile no more”. She points to a sexual connotation in the shape of the clay at this point in time.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Powell's use of the word “nauseating” to describe this ephemeral shape implies that the starkly sexual image that emerges in the film is not one of eroticism, but rather one that is forced upon the viewer through the dense touch marks on the shaped clay, its dynamics in stop-motion animation, and the almost intimate gaze of the reversed camera. The close-fitting gaze of the reversed camera forces the viewer to intervene in the visual effect. The negative portrayal of sexuality is reminiscent of Foucault's discussion of the “repressive hypothesis” in *The History of Sexuality*, in which discourse practices and technologies of power produce the category of “sexuality”, inverting its effects into causes, and diverting people's attention from various phenomena to this constructed object.<sup>4</sup> The instinctive aversion to the close-up image of the reversed camera maps out people's obedience to an invisible construction. This obedience, in Švankmajer's view, results in a “slavishly follow” of ideology. The sudden intrusion of “sexual” images and the parody of the “hideous throg” in the original literature with their obvious evil temperament may be a manifestation of Švankmajer's desire to break through all the rules and constraints on the imagination in his creation.

As a result, Švankmajer has not only restored the horror atmosphere in *Usher* with the help of the sense of touch, but also established a surreal world of objects as opposed to the everyday world, completed his reconstruction of the original.

## 5 Conclusions

The sense of touch is both the main medium for translating the mental tension in the original literary text and the main object of Švankmajer's expression in *Usher*. Firstly, with the help of *Usher*, Švankmajer formally brings the sense of touch into his film creation by interpreting the original text through the audio-visual evocation of the sense of touch in the order of establishing the centre of touch, realising the sense of touch through audio-visual and establishing the sense of touch through communication. Secondly, the director uses audiovisualisation to show the audience the possibilities of “tactile memory” and “tactile imagination”, attempting to unlock the shackles of



pragmatism attached to the sense of touch, and encouraging the audience to use their own experience and creativity to enter the work, replacing the passive mode of acceptance. The audience is encouraged to use their own experiential materials and creativity to enter the work, replacing the passive mode of viewing. Finally, as a continuation of Švankmajer's distinctive animation style and an iconic starting point for the practice of tactile art in film and television, *Usher* is representative of the director's entire creative spectrum. Starting from this film, the study of the director's other works and similar works by other directors will gain a referential perspective.

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