

FILMMAKERS IN WONDERLAND

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"I think it worked quite well but not entirely as I expected, thought Alice to herself." Jan Svankmajer (1988)

Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) is the latest in a long line of film adaptations of Lewis Carroll's books, the first being a splendid twelve-minute short made in 1903.

I enjoyed aspects of Burton's film, mainly the set-up before Alice enters Wonderland and some moments with the Red Queen, but overall it left me wanting something more. I wanted to be surprised and taken on a journey through a magic world where anything could happen. I have seen several adaptations and interpretations. The 1951 animated Disney film most definitely is worth watching, as is the 1903 version. But I believe the most interesting version is Jan Svankmajer's *Alice* (1988).

Svankmajer's film mixes live action and stop motion to create a surrealist Wonderland that is terrifying and bewildering. More like a nightmare than a dream, it captures a view of the world as we experience it as children – or maybe more as we remember experiencing it as children. There is no nostalgia; there is no sweet silliness: it is a world in which nothing makes sense and every simple task becomes blocked with confusing and often violent obstacles. The rich sound design that accompanies the images only exaggerates the uncomfortable feeling of this world where everything is alive, drawers open and close on their own, skeletons scuttle about, socks slip off feet and try to escape and where food bursts with nails and pins in order to not be eaten. This Wonderland is a truly confusing place. There are no rules or logic; Alice goes from moment to moment trying to make sense of it but making very little progress. Perhaps it is a journey in which she learns more about herself and how she deals with and reacts to the world than she learns about the world itself. Svankmajer's film opens with Alice sitting on a grass bank throwing stones into a river. She addresses the viewer, "Alice thought to herself, you will now see a film, made for children, perhaps. But I nearly forgot: you must close your eyes, otherwise you won't see anything..."



Moments later she is sitting in a room surrounded by her toys, throwing stones into a china teacup. A taxidermist's white rabbit comes to life and smashes his way through the glass of his display case using a pair of scissors. He clicks his teeth loudly and runs across the room, which becomes a muddy field. Alice follows. The rabbit climbs head-first into a drawer of a writing desk which stands in the field. Alice reaches it and attempts to open it but falls over. When she does get it open she cuts her fingers on a sharp compass before squeezing herself into the drawer and twisting impossibly until her feet follow her in and the drawer closes. The sight of her legs twisting and bending like rubber as she wriggles into the small space is truly alarming, but it reminds me strongly of the lack of fear and adventurousness of my own childhood, during which I was often to be found under tables or in cupboards pretending they were the cabins of pirate ships or caves on desert islands.

Like Carroll's book, Alice is about loss of innocence and the confusion and frustration of making sense of the world

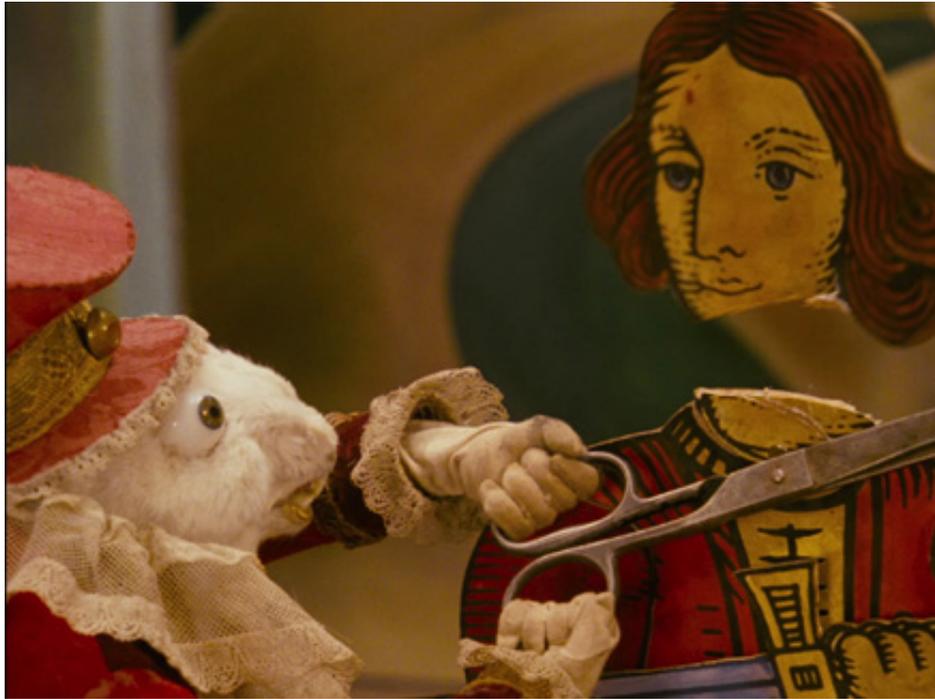


around us that so often can appear meaningless. Alice responds in a very matter-of-fact way to the most bizarre and violent moments. Everything she sees and experiences is illogical – the only real certainty she has is that anything could happen. A lot of the time Alice is just taking it in. Like all new experiences, we never really understand them until after they have happened, and spend our adult lives resolving and making sense of the things that shaped us as children.

As children you are constantly grappling with an oversized world: door handles are too high, you are never quite strong enough to do the things you want. Scale is a serious issue. In *Alice*, Svankmajer's heroine is constantly faced with this problem: everything is either too big or too small and no matter how many times she grows or shrinks things are never quite right. Every door, drawer or cupboard becomes a real challenge and is never quite what she expects it to be. One moment a drawer will open and simply be a drawer full of scissors. Next moment, it will be a doorway to another place.

Time in *Alice* has its own logic too, passing fast and slow at its own will. I long for the way I experienced time as a child. Days would last forever. It would seem possible to do so much and discover so many things in a single day. Svankmajer's film is contained within a house, which is very much the world a child exists in: most of the adventures take place in and around the domestic setting. Alice goes from room to room experiencing something different in each. The space is that of the imagined; rooms seem to move and change; neither space nor time is reliable. Films reach us in a similar way to dreams but ones of this type do so all the more: you must give yourself over to it and not try to impose a logic or find a story or meaning but let yourself be taken on the journey and see where it takes you, saving reflection until later.

I think that what attracts filmmakers to the story of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is that it can be twisted and changed to suit the desires of the filmmaker. It is not driven by plot, but made up of moments along a journey in which characters and situations come and go, with Alice as the only constant. The story is seen through the eyes of Alice: she is anybody; any of us. The structure is that of a journey – we have a desired destination (to get home) – but what is more important and interesting are the experiences along the way and the creatures she meets. This is what is so wonderful about the *Alice* books: bursting with ideas, characters and situations they are a rich source for filmmakers to draw upon.



The world of film is that of dreams and memories. Filmmakers construct these new realities using the one that is around us, but re-imagined. In much the same way that Alice's fantasy reflects her reality (various objects of Wonderland are all present in her playroom), a filmmaker's films can only ever be a reflection of their reality. The story of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* allows filmmakers a structure and a springboard from which to explore their own memories, fantasies and dreams but in a context that people know. Take a girl called Alice on a journey after a white rabbit into another world and the audience will follow. What happens on that journey is down to personal choice and preference.

"So many out-of-the-way things had happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible." *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll

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