

# GAME WITH STONES



## FILMOGRAPHIC DETAILS

**Direction:** Jan Švankmajer, Austria 1965 **Screenplay:** Jan Švankmajer

**Produced by:** Studio A, A. Hans Puluž, Froschberg Filmstudio **Camera:** Peter Puluž

**Length:** 8:30 minutes **Format:** 35mm **Image/sound:** colour, sound

## OVERVIEW OF CONTENT AND FILM AESTHETIC

### The film's sensory material

The experimental animation film GAME WITH STONES, by the Czech director and visual artist Jan Švankmajer is a film without people. Objects such as a clock, a faucet, a bucket and countless stones are the film's characters. Things that have no

common context are animated and thus become the sensory material of GAME WITH STONES. The materiality of those things is thus clearly displayed; on the one hand the firm and partly raw natural elements, such as wood and stone, on the other hand the mechanically interrelated





metals of which the bucket, the tap, the clock and the music box are made.

### **A clock on the wall as sculpture**

After the opening credits have been shown on an extremely weathered wooden door, it opens creakily inwards. The camera accepts the invitation and enters a barren room, its tilts following cobwebbed cracks in the walls. The room is never seen in its entirety, so the viewers do not know where they are. Only the constant ticking of a clock is heard, even before it is seen. Suddenly a fast camera movement brings the clock into frame; an old-fashioned wall clock with Roman numerals and a swinging pendulum hangs on the whitewashed wall. Attached to the clock are a tap and a bucket, so that it reminds one less of a real object than of a surreal sculpture. Close-ups of this constantly ticking clock are dynamically intercut with each other, as if one wanted to dismantle it into its components in order to view it from every aspect: cogs, face, pendulum, hands, tap, bucket, etc. This mysterious clock sets the mood of the film and gives it its pace; it gives the filmic time a rhythm and determines when the game with stones begins and ends.

### **Five games with stones**

In fast motion the hands of the clock move forwards around its face. When it strikes 12 the first game with stones begins, which

from this point on will be repeated at intervals of three hours; two stones slip out of the tap attached to the clock and plop with a crash into the metal bucket hanging below. At this, a gleaming golden cylinder is set in motion, acoustically signifying that it belongs to a music box. The first round of the game concentrates on contrasts of colour: a white stone and a black one are animated; the white stone against a black background, the black stone against a white background. From an initial two stones emerge four, six, eight and many more, which are lightly set in motion in ever-varying constellations of black and white stones (with shapes such as stars, squares, lines, triangles etc.). With the returning ticking of the clock on the wall, the first round of the game abruptly ends. As if linked to the clock's mechanism, the bucket now throws the stones out and they land on the dirty stone floor with a dull clatter.

As if moved by a ghostly force, the clock's hands now advance three hours. The next round of the game begins at three o'clock – once more with the stones squeezed out and a cheerful music box tune. The focus is again on colours, but no longer just black and white, also intermediate shades of beige, grey, brown and speckled combinations of black and white. Close-ups that show not whole stones, but their material, texture and colouration, dominate the



images. There are still three further variations of the game with stones to come; at 6 o'clock the hitherto abstract game with stones becomes concrete. The stones become anatomical figures – skeletal hands and feet, masculine, feminine and genderless bodies. At 9 o'clock large stones crumble into pebbles, that once more take the shape of concrete images; faces of stone change into an elephant's head and once more turn into faces, which look at each other, kiss and swallow one another. The final game tableau at 12 o'clock shows a

series of brittle stones that are sundered into pieces – often as the result of a blow from another stone. Just as at the end of each round of the game, at the end of the film the stones are thrown out of the bucket onto the floor. The weight of the stones has caused the bottom of the bucket to burst, so that the last stones fall straight through and the game with stones cannot be continued. Only the music box melody begins again and at the end of the film prevails against the clock's mechanical ticking.



## ARTISTIC DESIGN AND HISTORICAL CLASSIFICATION OF THE FILM

### Animation means vivification

GAME WITH STONES was made in the space of a few weeks with simple resources in an Austrian farmhouse. In making it, Švankmajer animated inanimate objects (= vivified; anima, Latin for soul), in such a way that the effect is of things acting independently. In order to show the hands of the clock advancing three hours in a short space of time, they were photographed for a single frame in their initial positions, minimally moved forwards and photographed again. This procedure was repeated by the film-maker until the hands of the clock had moved three hours. When one projects a strip of film photographed by this stop-motion technique with a projector at 24 frames per second, this gives the illusion of quickly moving hands or of a clock whose hands are turned by a ghostly operator. Along with the animated hands, the film-maker also

edited close-ups into the clock sequence – such as the clock's cogs or pendulum – and this artistic device further breaks down the illusion of a steady progression of time.

### The reality of surrealism

The film owes its simultaneously playful and disturbing effect most especially to the influences of surrealism. Just as surrealist art is always anchored in reality, so Švankmajer also begins his film; at first he focuses on the raw material of reality – the farmhouse with its aging wood, the walls with their cracks and cobwebs. The reality thus introduced does not, however, become the location for a straightforward narrative; the film, rather, suspends the natural time-space fabric. It is thus, despite the clear description of the location at the beginning of the film, unclear where the film's action – especially the game with stones – is taking

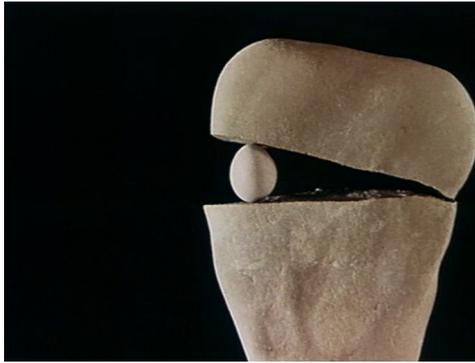
place. Despite the constant ticking of the clock and the ever-present evidence that time is moving forward, the film's time, with its three-hour rhythm, follows an utterly artificial logic. In a cyclical rhythm that goes from 12 o'clock to 12 o'clock, *GAME WITH STONES* keeps creating new worlds, each functioning according to highly idiosyncratic rules.



In this surrealistic state of affairs there are no people to take part in a narrative. Instead, it is the objects who act, apparently independently, taken out of their normal functional contexts and combined and recombined with one another. It is as if Švankmajer wanted to take the famous surrealistic phrase coined by the poet Leautrémont, „... fair ... as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella“ and recast it visually as „... fair ... as the chance meeting on an animation table of a tap, a clock and a bucket.“ When things are taken out of their contexts and recombined with one another,

art can understand them differently; a clock can indeed mark the passage of time, but it can also give rise to things that have no meaning nor fulfill any purpose. A bucket full of stones could be useful for the construction of a wall, but it could also be the means of initiating a purely kinetic and acoustic game. That things can be not only functional, but that they can also take on other roles and identities – depending on where they find themselves – is a doctrine of surrealist art. The objects thus prevail over their functions at the end of the film; the bucket is broken and the loud ticking of the clock is also drowned out.





By turning the laws of reality upside-down and subverting them, the surrealist aesthetic can also have a political effect. It plays the illogical, the improbable, the impossible, the surprising and the amazing against that which exists, in which every cog in a machine seems to have a fulfilled purpose. Unlike in France, where surrealism blossomed between the world wars, in Czechoslovakia after the Second World War it survived as a subversive way of art and life, providing incisive images beneath the surface of the organised communist society.

#### **An atmosphere of departure: the 1960s in Czechoslovakia**

There was a mood of new departures in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, just as in other European countries (see also Hans-jürgen Pohland's *SCHATTEN*). In film, this manifested itself, for example, in the „Czech New Wave“, with the prominent exponents including the directors Miloš Forman and Věra Chytilová. The suppression of the „Prague Spring“ in 1968 reversed the policies of reform, including the lifting of censorship and more autonomy for trade unions and cultural organisations, that had been set in motion by Alexander Dubcek, who was replaced by a successor more loyal to Moscow.

#### **THE FILM-MAKER**

Born in Prague in 1934, visual artist and film-maker Jan Švankmajer graduated as a puppeteer and puppet-maker from the Prague Academy of Art. Švankmajer had always been adept in artistic expression in a variety of forms, but it was film that attracted his particular creative attention.

Since his cinema debut in 1964 with *THE LAST TRICK OF MR. SCHWARCEWALLDE AND MR. EDGAR*, he has been working continuously as a film-maker. Even so, it took nearly 20 years until his work achieved international recognition. This was partly due to the fact that Švankmajer worked on the fringes of the commercial cinema, but it also had political reasons. Between 1972 and 1979 he was not permitted to work as a film-maker. During this period Švankmajer, who had joined the Prague branch of the official Surrealist movement in 1970, was active mainly in visual arts, his creations including sculptures and mobiles, some of which he later used in his films. He resumed his film-making work after the 1989 „Velvet Revolution“, taking up where he had left off in 1968. His film work, which is marked by unrestrained freedom, resists any impulse towards producing a commodity for exploitation.



## A CHILD'S POINT OF VIEW

The film GAME WITH STONES has an aesthetic approach which is closely linked to a child's range of experience. Collecting and playing with stones, as well hitting them against each other till they crumble, are favourite occupations for small children in nature, regardless of their cultural environment. So, too, the detachment from function and recombination of objects shown in the film is a significant element in the world of children at play. The variety of different stones – large and small, light and

dark, of one colour or patterned, round and oval, intact and broken – can be fascinating. The diverse ways in which the film uses them can inspire children to their own ideas of stone pictures – whether abstractly geometrical or concretely material. Additionally, the idea that things can lead their own lives is one that is very familiar in the world of a child's imagination. The childish openness precisely to the film's irrational moments makes GAME WITH STONES a film which can also interest children.



## FROM SEEING TO CREATING



### Stone picture flipbook

**Impulses:** Fine motor skills, animation, flipbook

**Material:** Stones, digital camera, coloured construction paper

To prepare for these units the children, in the normal course of their activities, collect stones of different colours, sizes and shapes.

The stones that are brought, or possibly others, will be turned into pictures by laying them on coloured construction paper and photographing them, with the aim of producing a flipbook. The single-frame exposure feature of the camera will teach the children about the principles of the motion picture;



one stone picture is arranged and photographed, after which individual stones are moved minimally, photographed, then moved a little more and again photographed. The children repeat this procedure until between 15 and 20 individual images

have been created. With the pictures printed and attached to a flipbook, the children experience the way in which the action of their thumbs on the pages can make the stones they have photographed dance.





### Animation film with stones

**Impulses:** Fine motor skills, animation, film

**Material:** Stones, coloured construction paper, digital camera, stop-motion software, possibly a music box

For an animation film, the children gather together, along with an adult, at an animation table, that is, a work surface with even lighting and a camera over the table, connected to stop-motion software. At this work area the children can arrange their stones on a coloured background to create a picture, ensuring that they are within range of the camera. By photographing their stone pictures, moving individual stones bit by bit – as with the flipbook – and re-photographing, a short animation film, in which the stones come to life, gradually takes shape. The animation films that result can, if so desired, have a melody from a music box added to the soundtrack.

### FURTHER READING AND VIEWING

Claus Löser: Jan Svankmajer und sein neuer Film „Otesánek“. In: film-dienst 02/2001.

Olaf Möller: Und der Wajda Morris Freedom Prize geht an... ...Jan Svankmajer, tschechischer Filmmacher. In: Die Welt. 9.2. 2001.

DVD: Jan Svankmajer: The Complete Short Films. Released by the British Film Institute (bfi).

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