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DREAMS AND MAGIC IN THE ILLUSTRATIONS AND PUPPET MOVIES OF JIŘÍ TRNKA

*“Art is good when it speaks to everybody.
It is concerned with ideas
And ideas never are only Czech,
They are always human.”*

Jiří Trnka

Abstract

The paper attempts to introduce the work of Jiří Trnka, a Czech visual artist, who achieved international fame. It focuses on his concern with world-famous children's books (e.g. the fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, Hauf or H. C. Andersen), and, in particular, with English literature (Shakespeare and his *Midsummer Night's Dream* or Lewis Carroll).

Key words: Jiří Trnka, puppet movies, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, fairy tales, imagination

Jiří Trnka (1912-1969) ranks among the foremost representatives of Czech modern art in the 20th century, and alongside the most remarkable protagonists of the visual art scene over a period ranging from the late 1930s through the end of the 1960s. A member of the generation whose worldview was formed to a significant degree by the Second World War, he distinguished himself by his multiple talents and gained the respect of both the critics and the public as a draughtsman, book-illustrator, puppet and toy-designer, painter, animated film-maker and sculptor.

In his work on the design of Czechoslovakia's national pavilion for the Expo '58 World Exhibition in Brussels, Trnka proved his talent for interior architecture. It was especially thanks to his share in the project that the pavilion was awarded first prize by an international jury. The same inventiveness and originality were characteristic of his share in the art programme of his country's presence at the Expo '67 in Montreal, Canada (*Tree of Toys; Tree of Tales*), which was once again greatly acclaimed by the critics.

Trnka came from a lower-middle-class family which was still mindful of its rural farming roots. Showing artistic talent from early childhood, he became fond of drawing and wood-carving. As a school boy, he would make wooden marionettes for his own home puppet theatre with which he would stage fairy-tale performances for a broad circle of local children.

Later he studied at Prague's Academy of Art and Industrial Design, where he acquired the knowledge essential for his future career as a book illustrator, a field he excelled in for the rest of his life. He became famous especially for his children's book illustrations: his pictures for a book of fairy tales by H. C. Andersen, for instance, earned him the National Prize of Denmark.

His illustrations, both the drawings and the watercolours, mirror his remarkable and profound feeling for the atmosphere of the stories as well as his effort to grasp and point out the significant features of the texts. Thus the style of his illustrations changes in accordance with the variety of the writers' styles, responding to the differences in sources, attitudes and traditions.

I would like to refer to the following examples:

1. Wilhelm Hauff's *Caravan* (illustrated in 1941)

The pictures, focusing on the exotic environment of the Orient, correspond to the haunting mood of the narrative. The mysterious world of sultans, camels and jinns, however, is transformed into forms comprehensible to children.

Trnka seems to concentrate on evoking a spellbinding atmosphere, the dramatic aspect is suppressed in his pictures.

Exploiting the big format of the book, freely arranging his figures in the space of the pictures, and frequently letting the outlines of his illustrations melt into the white pages, he suggests the notion of an infinite, dreamy and

airy world as well as the lack of any restraint in developing his fantastic visions.

The theme of the East reappears in Trnka's illustrations for the Czech collection of *The Thousand and One Nights* (1956). Despite the similarity of visual forms, the illustrator's style is different. The crucial motifs, corresponding to the action of the stories, are set in the foreground, and the description of the environment, both nature and architecture, becomes more realistic.

2. The Brothers Grimm (illustrated in 1942)

According to his own words, he found it difficult to cope with the "strange, rough" character of these fairy tales. The scenes of violence and cruelty were in sharp contradiction to the tradition of Czech fairy tales (more lyrical and more concerned with religious or moral ideals).

Trnka's illustrations become more expressive, following the subject of the stories. Especially the black and white drawings, with their sharp outlines and dark shades, reflect the haunting, Gothic mood of the narrative. In the coloured pictures, however, lyrical elements are employed while the coarseness of the text is smoothed down though sinister undertones remain present in disquieting details.

In this respect, we can see the importance of symbolic hints in the evocation of atmosphere.

3. H. C. Andersen (il. in 1957)

Like Andersen, Trnka drew inspiration from the real world and succeeded in transforming the ordinary into the wonderful.

In his illustrations, the emphasis is laid on the lyrical atmosphere, realistic description and emotional experience. Fantastic motifs are employed as metaphors and poetic symbols, sometimes with humorous, even ironic undertones. Developing Andersen's concern with personification, Trnka's pictures focus on the point of intersection of the real and the irrational.

The complicated, elaborate composition corresponds with the multitude of meanings hidden beyond the surface levels of Andersen's stories.

4. Charles Perrault (il. in 1960)

Responding to the style of the stories, Trnka's gentle drawings and coloured pictures express the romantic connection of the ideal and reality, the court tradition and folklore, lyricism and humour.

The discussed illustrations testify to the versatility of Trnka's art as well as to his creative attitude to literary models. These abilities contributed to the success of Trnka's works inspired by William Shakespeare (*Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *A Winter's Tale*...).

In my paper I will concentrate on Trnka's puppet movie, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1959), which is addressed to an audience of both adults and children.

Trnka's interest in the art of animation, starting with cartoons and moving on to animated puppet films, represents an important chapter in his career: His pioneering and inspiring contribution to the development of the art of film-making and the history of world cinema (the beginnings of the widescreen) won him worldwide renown.

Through his movie, Trnka followed up the tradition of creative responses to Shakespearean heritage (the theatre performances, translations, paintings, musical compositions...). As Ivona Mišterová points out, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was one of the most frequently performed plays by Shakespeare on the Czech stage.

In Trnka's conception, the story is developed through ballet and pantomime, supported by the expressive music of Václav Trojan. Shakespeare's comedy turns into the fantastic play of colours, shapes, movements and music. It is projected onto the silver screen as a colourful pageant, whose original epic attributes underwent further elaboration in the form of mimes with music.

Although many of Trnka's predecessors had used "talking" puppets with movable jaws, Trnka himself never liked this idea. According to Jiří Brdečka, Trnka "sealed the lips of his puppets with silence so that they could not ruin the delicate magic that was expressed in their whole being" (*Trnka and Shakespeare, "A Midsummer Night's Dream,"* Prague: Artia, 1960, 129).

Those who have written of Trnka's puppets have repeatedly expressed their surprise at the wide variety of emotions imprinted on the immobile faces. In this respect, Brdečka refers to the artist's technique: The heads of Trnka's puppets have never been larger than a hen's egg. The equally

miniature brushwork comes to life on the screen very much enlarged and the effects of each tiny line are greatly multiplied. A hardly discernible trait in the line of the mouth can cause the whole features to assume an entirely different expression. Thus even contradictory emotions are included in the lines of a seemingly expressionless face, gradually revealing the changes of mood.

Following Shakespeare, Trnka distinguishes between three different worlds and storylines: the intoxicating love of several couples, the magic atmosphere of personified natural forces, and the real world, both rough and tender, of country craftsmen. Where Shakespeare uses language to point out the significant features of each world, Trnka employs rhythm and visual effects. In Trnka's film, the language is reduced to occasional commentaries and Shakespearean metaphors, outlining the situation and creating the atmosphere. As a Czech literary theorist Břetislav Hodek puts it, "the ethereal quality of Shakespeare's verse is adequately expressed through dance movements, and many of Shakespeare's figures of speech are portrayed by means of animation" (*Shakespeare and the Puppet Film, "A Midsummer Night's Dream,"* Artia, 1960, 150).

Lacking the advantages of the spoken word, Trnka had to compensate for this loss by other means. His departures from the original text, however, are always related to the mood and the meanings of Shakespeare's story.

Theseus, for example, is portrayed as a gentleman in Shakespeare's play. Nevertheless, his sophisticated wit and condescending attitudes, reflected in his sharp and ridiculing comments on the amateur performance, border with disdain. According to Jiří Brdečka, "the natural democrat that is in Trnka has never been able to forgive Theseus his cheap mockery" ("Trnka and Shakespeare," 133). Once or twice Trnka's Theseus glances slyly into a hand-mirror to inspect his appearance. For Jiří Brdečka, these small interludes, of which there are no traces in the original play, are the result of Trnka's revenge on the courtly mocker.

It can be said that Trnka managed to do a great deal of work on each character of the play. Without altering anything of Shakespeare's original sketch, he accentuated the differences existing between Lysander and Demetrius. While on the theatre stage these two compete as young aristocrats, Trnka has deepened their rivalry by making contrasts in their social standing. His Lysander is not a nobleman. More likely is he a musician, dancer or poet, an artist in all senses, who has no need for a noble attribute to arouse love in a beautiful girl of one of the best families.

As for the figures of amateur theatre players, in the original text there is a certain ambiguity in Bottom. His enthusiasm for acting and his hunger for a role of any kind are often supposed the most realistic and lifelike aspect of the whole play. In this respect, his character inspires the following question: is he a really talented actor, or is it only his vanity which is appeased by the freedom of the stage? Shakespeare's text allows both theories. Trnka's Bottom is not only a charming fellow, never perplexed with the turn of the situation, but he is also a born actor. Trnka considered a daring idea and changed the "most lamentable comedy" into real drama: After inhaling the fragrant scent of Puck's magic flower, Bottom ceases to be an amateur player. He becomes an immortal lover, twin to Romeo, and the captivated court audiences sit spellbound watching the metamorphosis.

The magic of the mysterious forest is induced through personification and the act of animating the wood is accomplished by making all the flowers, acorns and roots behave like animals. Trnka paid great attention to the role of fairy-tale figures (fairies, sprites, goblins, water nymphs...), especially to Puk, Oberon and Titania. According to Břetislav Hodek, Trnka's Titania is "The Queen of Flowers" and Oberon, dressed in garments of fruit and coloured leaves, dwelling in the silence of green trees and intermingling with their roots and branches, represents the King of the Woods. In Hodek's words, both elves testify to Jiří Trnka's delight in "bizarre shapes and unusual colour combinations" (1960: 150). Jiří Brdečka points out the similarity between Trnka's Oberon and the portraits of Arcimboldo (Brdečka 1960: 137).

The exceptional delicacy of his work is reflected, for example, in Titania's cape, which is made of miniature fairies, elves, flowers, berries and insects with moving limbs, wings and leaves (on the whole, about 80 figures and 300 flowers and animals). Thus a short scene with Titania putting her cape down required the five-day work of three animators.

Let us also notice the shape that Trnka has given to Puck. Puck is the least ancient of all the spirits in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as he seems to have jumped into the woods of old Greece straight from traditional Anglo-Saxon folklore. Trnka's slender, willowy creature floats in the air, changes his image a number of times and tries the effects of his magic flower by awakening the love of two indifferent snails or by arousing desire of the marble Nymph who leaves her pedestal and passionately embraces the marble Faun.

In accordance with the model, love becomes a uniting force connecting particular scenes and figures. Trnka's moving images express both passion and tenderness, sensuality and chastity, calculation and sincerity, comic obstacles and painful misunderstandings.

Trnka's interpretation, however, opposes that of Jan Kott, in particular Kott's analysis of Titania's lust in the connection with the symbolic meaning of the ass head (1974: 213-237). Trnka's poetic vision of *Midsummer Night's Dream* lacks the violence and cruelty accompanying animal sexuality and points out the playful, humorous aspects of the play. As Břetislav Hodek puts it, in his interpretation of Shakespeare's play Trnka emphasizes the lyrical aspects of the story and leaves the comedy, which the public often associates with puppets, to Quince and his amateur company (1960: 150).

Trnka's concern with the subject of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be also seen in the series of coloured lithographies, created in 1961, and in a number of drawings and sketches.

It is also important to mention a tale for children based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, retold by a Czech writer Eduard Petiška and illustrated by Trnka in 1960.

On the whole, Trnka created twenty two films and won a number of awards, including major festival awards (from Cannes and Venice, among others).

One of the puppet films planned by Trnka was to draw on Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Due to his untimely death he managed to create only several pictures, which, however, represent a beautiful testimony to his insight into Carroll's fantastic universe. Permeated with a surrealist atmosphere, they help to evoke the reverse conception of time and space. Particular figures hover and float through infinity, experiencing magic encounters and wonderful incidents in a remarkable world where the impossible becomes possible.

The influence of English literature (Oscar Wilde, Frances Hodgson Burnett) is reflected also in his prose for children, *The Garden*, published in 1962. The story as well as the pictures focus on the encounter with the unknown and the mysterious, which can be experienced in the middle of the most ordinary reality. The garden can be considered as both a real space and a symbolic image, containing seemingly contradictory elements and bringing them into a harmonious unity. It is this kind of magic that permeates through the whole work of Jiří Trnka.

Like a devoted and inspired guide, he takes us to the hidden, secret gates of wonderful, imaginative worlds and makes them visible.

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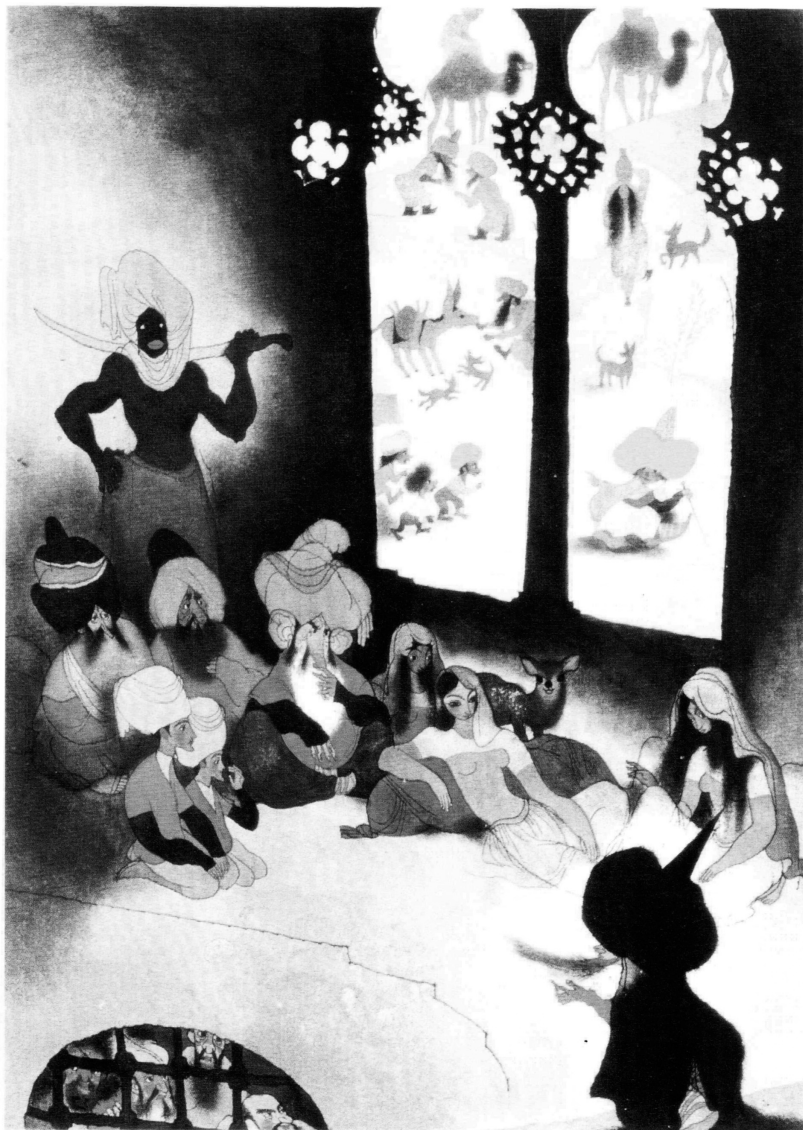
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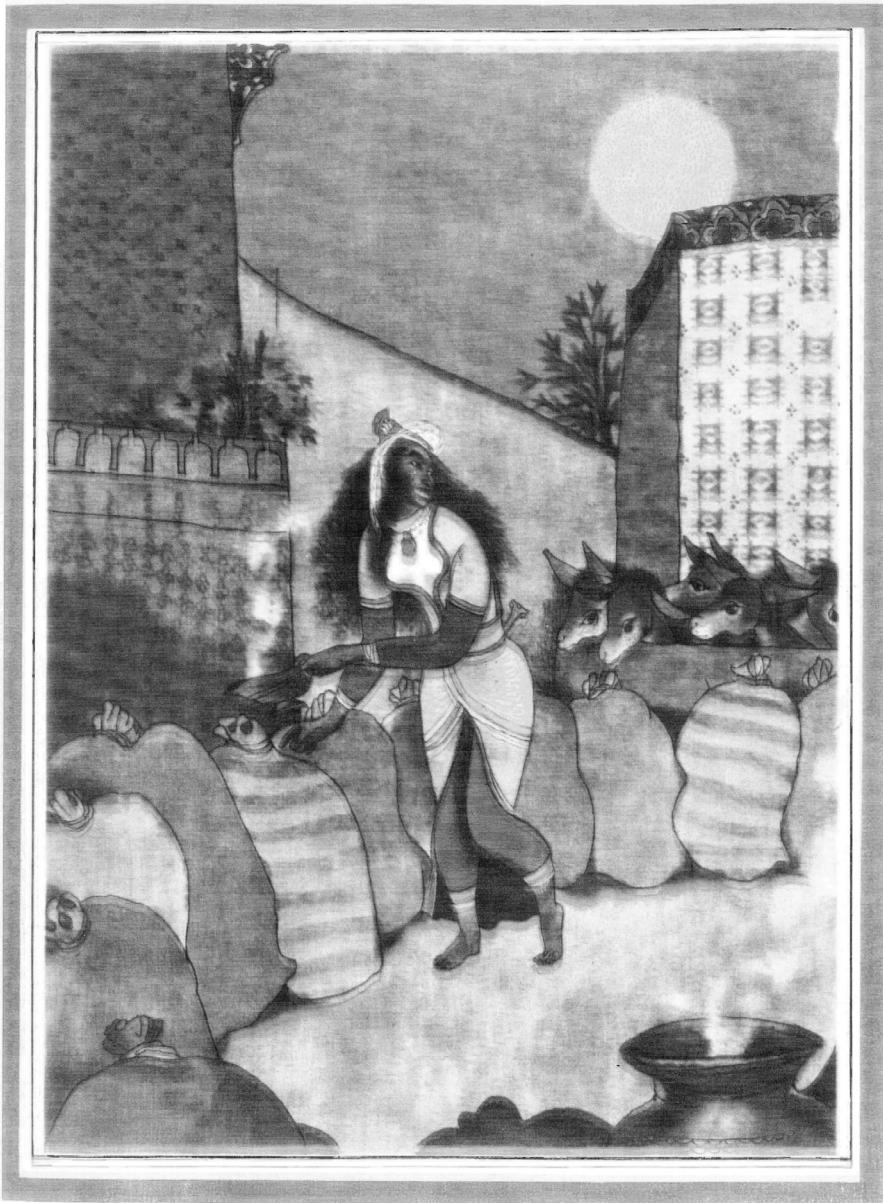
Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*



William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960)



Wilhelm Hauff's *Caravan* (1941)



The Thousand and One Nights (1956)



The Brothers Grimm (1942)

Камила Вранкова

СНОВИ И МАГИЈА У ИЛУСТРАЦИЈАМА И ЛУТКАРСКИМ ФИЛМОВИМА
ЈИРИЈА ТРНКЕ

Сажетак

У овом есеју аутор анализира дело чешког визуелног уметника Јирија Трнке које је постало део светске ризнице дечје књижевности. Есеј је посебно бави Трнким илустрацијама прича из пера најпознатијих светских класика књижевности за децу (Браће Грим, Вилхелма Хауфа или Ханса Кристијана Андерсена). Посебну пажњу есеј посвећује причама које се базирају на делима енглеских аутора (Шекспира и његове драме *Сан летње ноћи*, као и романима Луиса Керола).

Кључне речи: Јири Трнка, луткарски филмови, *Сан летње ноћи*, бајке, машта.