

Neco z Alenky

(translation unknown; aka: "Alice")

UK / Switzerland / W Germany : 1988 : dir. Jan Svankmajer

: Condor / Film Four / Hessischer Rundfunk / SRG

: 85 min

prod: Peter-Christian Fueter : scr: Jan Svankmajer : dir.ph.: Svatopluk Maly

[Kristyna Kohoutová](#); [English version dubbed by [Camilla Power](#)]

No other on-screen cast

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 € M ☼	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
6090	3	6	0	1,831	7 7 7 7 7	Yes	April 2003

Bloomsbury Foreign Film Guide review:

"Alice (Kahoutova, the only human among puppets), bored, sits in a room full of strange objects. When a stuffed white rabbit comes to life in his glass case, dresses up and leaves through an open table drawer, she follows him and falls down a deep tunnel to a cellar. She sets off in pursuit through a maze of subterranean vaults, meeting, among others, a hookah-smoking caterpillar, the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, and the King and Queen of Hearts.

"My Alice is an interpretation of Carroll's fermented by my own childhood with all its particular obsessions and anxieties" explained the director of his first feature-length film. Svankmajer, well known for short, surreal and anarchic animation films, manages to remain faithful to the spirit of the children's classic while injecting it with his own black humour.

There is certainly nothing cosy about this telling, which starts with "Now you will see a film... for children... perhaps", and there are many innovations and variations along the way. When Alice lifts a spoon of jam to her lips, she discovers the liquid turned into a drawing pin, and a bread roll suddenly sprouts nails. Among the many vivid metamorphoses is the caterpillar forming itself out of a sock, two dolls' eyeballs and false teeth in a drawer.

Brilliant as the conception is, the film at 85 minutes overstays its welcome in Wonderland and is continually disrupted by close-ups of Alice's lips telling the story, more disconcerting in the badly-dubbed English version."

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"A young girl follows a rabbit through a broken glass case into Wonderland¹. A free, sometimes disturbing interpretation with surrealist overtones, of Lewis Carroll's masterpiece by a great animator that, with a mix of live actors and animation, comes closer than any other to conjuring the curious atmosphere of the original. *** "

Radio Times Guide to Films review:

"This stunning modern-day version of the Lewis Carroll story from Czech director, animator and surrealist Jan Svankmajer uses every live-action technique in the special effects manual, and contains dashes of startling eroticism. The absurdist universe created by the Prague native plays around liberally with the source material, yet remains remarkably true to its spirit. Flesh-and-blood actress Kristyna Kohoutova shares the screen with a host of scary fish, skeleton birds and, most unusually, perambulating raw meat. *** "

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"Nobody who has ever seen one of Svankmajer's shorts is likely to doubt that the Czech surrealist would make the definitive version of Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in

¹ No she doesn't.

Wonderland". For no other film-maker – and that includes David Lynch – is so consistently inventive in his ability to marry pure startling nonsense with rigorous logic, black wit with piercing psychological insights. Here, as always, Svankmajer's methods are hugely enjoyable in their perversity: Alice (the only human in a feature debut populated by a fantastic array of superbly animated puppets) not only changes size, but actually becomes her own doll; when the White Rabbit loses his stuffing, he simply secures his gaping chest with a safety pin and eats the sawdust. Eggs crack to reveal skulls. Rolls sprout nails. Steaks crawl. A wonderland, indeed, imbued with a grotesque, cruel, and menacing dream-logic at once distinctively Svankmajer's and true to the spirit of Carroll."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Outstanding adaptation of Lewis Carroll's story by Jan Svankmajer, one of the world's leading figures in animation. The film brilliantly captures the surreal world of little Alice with bizarre erotic overtones. Not rated. **** "

The Virgin Film Guide review:

"This is a dark, surrealist interpretation of Lewis Carroll's *"Alice's Adventures in Wonderland"* by the brilliant Czech animator Jan Svankmajer. The director combines live action and puppet animation to create a disturbing vision of Alice's world, filled with images of death and violence. Although all the action takes place within a dream, Svankmajer, in true surrealist spirit, keeps the line between dream and reality ambiguous. Alice is the only live creature in the film, and it she who supplies the voices of her (often grotesque) animated companions. In one scene typical of Svankmajer's command of dream logic, the girl becomes her own doll. **"ALICE"** is macabre, haunting, and very true to the spirit of Carroll's book, exploring the marvels and fears of a child's imagination. ***1/2 "

[no listing in "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "The Critics' Film Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995" or "Variety Movie Guide 1993"]

Not to be confused with the 1990 Woody Allen film **"ALICE"**. For once, the *Time Out* review is spot on. This is, by a very long way, the best screen interpretation of Carroll's classic fantasy, in a different league altogether from the anodyne pantomime of most English-language adaptations, which might follow the narrative more literalistically, but do not even begin to fathom the darker currents of the tale – the subtle death jokes, the morbidity and insane logic. It is also practically the only Alice film to cast a child of precisely the right age (Irwin Allen's grotesque 1972 travesty did so, but his Alice, and every single character besides, was hopelessly miscast; while Gavin Millar's 1985 **"DREAMCHILD"** gave us one of the better portrayals of Alice, but only in teasing flashbacks from a rather dull story about the elderly Alice Liddell's first trip to America.)

Introduced as "A film for children – perhaps – only you must close your eyes, or you won't see anything", **"NECO Z ALENKY"** has neither a contemporary setting nor a 19th century one. His Alice (and the White Rabbit) are too floridly dressed for the present day, and the toys, instruments and domestic paraphernalia which clutter the film are vaguely "from the past", without any formalisation of period. It is strangely ambiguous chronologically, as dreams themselves are.

Svankmajer's Alice does not disappear down a rabbit-hole. Instead she pursues the White Rabbit – a taxidermist's specimen "bleeding" sawdust – up a barren rocky hillside and into the drawer of a draughtsman's or carpenter's desk, where she finds a cellar, knocks herself backwards into a bucket, and falls through the bottom of the bucket into a creaking lift or

dumb waiter, which descends ominously past rows and rows of shelves crammed with toys, jars of preserves, peculiar anatomical specimens. Finally she tumbles through a ceiling onto a pile of dried leaves in another cellar room. The leaves then gather themselves up and disappear into the drawer of a still smaller carpenter's desk, in which Alice finds a tiny key.

As you will see from that description, the director follows the thread of Carroll's story without confining himself to exactness. What he does not do, and most Alice films have done, is pick and mix characters and events from the two Alice books and throw them arbitrarily together. This is the most "adult" of all film versions to date, yet Svankmajer locates his events firmly where they belong, in the nursery, and in the tall darkened rooms of the child mind. The live Alice alternates repeatedly with her own doll, the White Rabbit's house is built of children's playblocks upon a table (but inside is constructed of wood and wire mesh like a rabbit hutch), the Mad Hatter and March Hare are broken-down old toys, the Ugly Duchess's house a toy house the size of a music box. Very few external settings are used, so that even the beautiful garden Alice spies through the tiny door is presented as a stage set in a toy theatre.

In 1988 the Cold War had not quite come to an end, and Svankmajer adds a discreet political note in the final trial sequence, where the White Rabbit hands Alice a script to read out from the dock, making her full confession (to stealing the tarts) and calling on the court to apply the severest penalty the law allows. This is more Kafka than Lewis Carroll, but it meshes seamlessly with what has gone before, and does not seem obtrusive.

Kristyna Kohoutova is well-nigh perfect, without a hint of preciousness or self-consciousness, and she takes a fair battering on her travels – from drawer-knobs that invariably come free when you apply the maximum pressure to them, from hurled stones and crockery, and – in one deliriously inventive moment – when she's immersed up to her chin in the hall full of tears, when a sailor rat pitches camp atop her head, hammers pegs into her scalp, and proceeds to light a cook-fire using her own hair for tinder. It would surely have delighted Dodgson.

But the film is so rich in baroque visuals it can be enjoyed by anyone not enchanted by the source books. Skulls hatch from eggs and scurry away, socks bore holes in a wooden floor like moles, Alice is attacked by a flying writing desk with raven's claws, the frog footman laps up flies with a thick human tongue that smashes crockery and dents pans, the Queen of Hearts passes through a doorway and vanishes for an instant – because she is a cutout and the doorway is the playing card she was cut out from. Svankmajer's surreal imagination is a constant delight, enhanced considerably by the soundwork of Ivo Spalj and Robert Jansa.

Some of the dialogue from the books remains intact, but the director is less interested in the conversations, or Alice's internal narratives, than with motifs such as relative size, physical harm, ritual performed for its own sake, food and ingestion, the ambiguity of the child's status in his/her surroundings. One would not expect him to be satisfied with the book's lame ending (twas all just a dream), and Alice wakes to find the White Rabbit's specimen case still vacant, the concealed drawer still present. She removes a large pair of scissors and remarks darkly "He's late. As usual. I shall have to cut off *his* head!"

Carroll purists may be irritated by some of the changes (no Ugly Duchess, no Cheshire Cat) but for everyone else this is the most satisfying Alice to date, and a rather sad reflection that it took a Czech film-maker to do this most English of children's books true justice.
Recommended.

See also Svankmajer's later "OTESANEK" ("Little Otik"), [ALICE IN WONDERLAND – GENERAL NOTE](#) for a chronological list of all other known versions, and subject index under [FANTASY / FOLK TALES / FAIRY TALES](#), [LIVE ACTION KIDS ~ ANIMATED SETTINGS](#), [RECOMMENDED TITLES](#) and [TOYS / DOLLS / MODELS](#).