

NEW YORK

Written by [Emily Macaux](#)

Visionary Surreal: The Quay Brothers' *Street of Crocodiles*



Quay Brothers, "Street of Crocodiles".

In restless anticipation of the [MoMA show *Quay Brothers: On Deciphering the Pharmacist's Prescription for Lip-Reading Puppets*](#) (opened just last weekend on August 12), I have been re-visiting the depths of the Quays' body of work. The show—billed as “the first presentation of the Quay Brothers' work in all their fields of creative activity”—promises a comprehensive, considered overview of this inimitable duo's eclectic oeuvre, which encompasses not only films and video but set designs, installations, stage projections, and a variety of works on paper. For anyone unfamiliar with the Quays, the show should provide an invaluable immersion in their extraordinarily rich creative practice. For me, an admitted film obsessive, the attendant series of screenings should be a singular opportunity to indulge a longstanding fascination with the Quays' cinematic work, including the seminal *Street of Crocodiles* (1986).

Based loosely on the Polish writer/artist Bruno Schulz's *Cinnamon Shops* (1934), *Crocodiles* is an intoxicating mélange of live action, puppetry, and stop-motion animation. Like so much of the Quay's work, the film confounds descriptive distinctions between the beautiful and the repulsive, the seductive and the repellant; in fact, the world of *Crocodiles* is one in which aesthetic definitions are collapsed and diffused, leaving in their wake an intangible yet implacable haze of atmosphere and sensation. What emerges is a realm of sense and substance that speaks directly to, and of, the most visceral dimensions of being and consciousness.

Crocodiles flickers to life with the image of a pallid man crossing an abandoned theatre and, by means of his own saliva, awakening the inner workings of a kinetoscope. Cutting to the interior of this mechanical world-within-a-world, the Quays' camera ushers us into an otherworldly sphere that is both overtly constructed and vividly organic. Quietly yet relentlessly, this world envelops us in its hallucinatory reality, one that defines itself through a dark yet heady play of texture, shape, shadow, and light.

As the Quays' camera glides abruptly, sharply, throughout the space, we discover a world in which the animate and the inanimate, the real and the unreal, are increasingly indistinguishable: witness a grim yet lively dance of metal screws, or a brutal prying-open of a pocket watch, whose innards appear as bloody entrails. Throughout the film, the mechanical is imbued with a living force, and artifice becomes the vehicle for decidedly human impulses, fears, and sensations. Thus a puppet-boy, facilitating the proceedings with a flashlight, displays a masklike face that is somehow eerily alive; and the film's central figure, a spindly, gaunt, puppet-man, displays pocked and rotted "flesh" and an anxious mien, both of which suggest not only physical decay but a sense of existential horror.



Quay Brothers, "Street of Crocodiles".

As Bruno Schulz once wrote, "The essence of reality is *meaning*. What has no meaning is not real for us."^[i] Through its intermingling images of life, death, vitality, and decay, *Crocodiles* seems to externalize the deepest, darkest realms of the subconscious; it envisions a world of beauty and terror, one that arises from and evokes human psychic reality. The Quays have described Schulz as "the secret catalyst"^[ii] of their work. Much like Schulz, whose writing conjures a vivid realm of the senses, *Crocodiles* gives us a world that disorients, discombobulates, and utterly mesmerizes. We cannot help but willingly surrender.

[i] Bruno Schulz, "The Mythicisation of Reality," essay first published in *Studio* 1936, Num. 3-4.

[ii] "Through a Glass Darkly: Interview with the Quay Brothers," *Senses of Cinema* 2002, Issue 19.