

**CHARLES UNIVERSITY IN PRAGUE**

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General Theory and History of Art and Culture

Department of Film Studies

**AESTHETICS OF THE CRACK-UP**

**DIGITAL KŘÍŽENECKÝ AND THE AUTONOMOUS  
CREATIVITY OF ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE**

Doctoral Dissertation Summary

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## Introduction

Would it be possible to do film theory differently, less “Theory A applied to Film B which is filed under Genre C” and more “from below,” from the perspective of a film object, of its multifarious details and facets, however marginal, unintentional, or aleatory they might be? Of course, throughout history of film and media theory there have already been attempts to turn these resisting details into focal points of analysis. For instance, everyone is familiar with Roland Barthes’s term “punctum,” an unintended and uncontrolled detail that surfaces in the photograph and pierces its viewer with an affective rather than symbolic meaning.<sup>1</sup> Within film studies, the “new cinephilia” championed (even fetishized) contingent and peripheral moments in moving images that require a true aficionado to be noticed and analyzed.<sup>2</sup> Numerous explorations of affect, sensation, and haptic visuality, inspired mainly by phenomenology and poststructuralism,<sup>3</sup> also promised to conceptualize moving images in terms of what disrupts, resists, or unsettles, what “happens too quickly to have happened.”<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, when these accounts appear in concrete analyses and interpretations, they typically end up describing the filmic details too negatively (as something that disturbs, escapes, and provokes yet rarely has a form of its own)<sup>5</sup> and/or too subjectively (as a thing with idiosyncratic meaning for a distinctive individual – cinephile or otherwise). Most importantly, the detail remains something that confirms pre-existing methodological and epistemological frameworks: within phenomenological or poststructuralist film theories that celebrate the “minor,”<sup>6</sup> such contingent elements are valued not for their distinctive traits, but for the simple fact of being contingent, and thereby conforming to certain notions of film analysis and film spectatorship. The appeal of the proverbial “wind in the trees” in early Lumière films does not lie in the individual forms

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005). See also: Paul Willemsen, “Through the Glass Darkly: Cinephilia Reconsidered,” in *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 223–258; Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006); Girish Shambu, *The New Cinephilia*. Expanded Second Edition (Montreal: caboose, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Anne Rutherford, *What Makes a Film Tick? Cinematic Affect, Materiality and Mimetic Innervation* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2011); Saige Walton, *Cinema’s Baroque Flesh: Film, Phenomenology and the Art of Entanglement* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 30.

<sup>5</sup> This negativist tendency in cultural affect theory was poignantly criticized by Eugenie Brinkema. Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> For the definition of the minor, see, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 26–27.

and movements this wind may acquire in different works of art,<sup>7</sup> but primarily in the fact that it moves the audience and displaces its attention towards the non-fictional, non-diegetic, and unarranged. Similarly, a face marred by scratch marks in an archival film does not propel theorists on a search for specific forms of scratches; but instead leads to reflections on history, decay, and the ravages of time.

Thus, we need a film theory that would treat contingencies as ends in themselves, as distinctive things that problematize rather than fit the existing conceptual frameworks and force us to reinvent them from scratch. Could we treat figurative and material accidents in moving images as full-fledged actors with distinctive aesthetic forms, functions, and effects and discernible origins and genealogies?

### **Primary Sources**

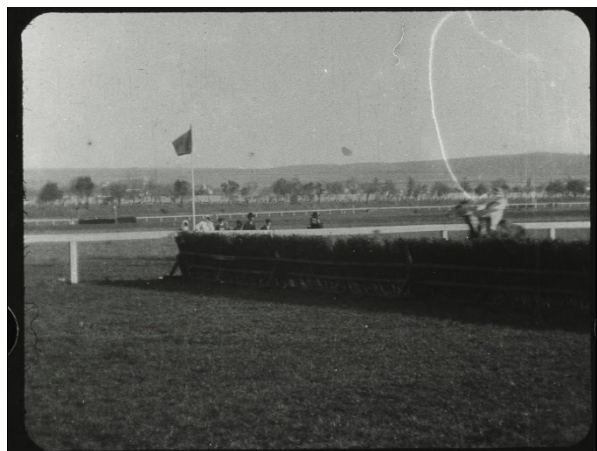
In order for these contingencies to be speculatively generative on their own, a special kind of film object and a special kind of cinematic experience are essential. In my case, the body of work that fueled my desire for a film theory “from below” was the collection of the “first Czech films,” made by Jan Kříženecký between 1898 and 1911. As a DVD / Blu-ray curator at the National Film Archive (Národní filmový archiv) in Prague, I had the opportunity to participate in the digitization of Kříženecký’s films from their original nitrate materials, which had been virtually unseen for around a hundred years.<sup>8</sup> When the digitized oeuvre was finally released on DVD and Blu-ray (*The Films of Jan Kříženecký*) in December 2019, it gave birth to a body of work that simulates an authentic archival imprint of history yet which is at the same time riddled with fissures, ellipses, and uncertainties. While the newly accessible films boast high-definition picture quality, achieved by scanning the materials in 4K, and many new options for exhibition and manipulation, the digitization process did not efface the deformations present in the material but rendered them all the more visible in the image. It not only preserved damages and instabilities caused by the ravages of time but also flaws inherent in the material properties of the original nitrate prints and negatives as well as those resulting from the mechanical

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<sup>7</sup> This research inquiry has recently been addressed by Jordan Schonig. Jordan Schonig, “Cinema’s Motion Forms: Film Theory, the Digital Turn, and the Possibilities of Cinematic Movement” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2017). Schonig’s dissertation has just been published in a revised and expanded form as a monograph: Jordan Schonig, *The Shape of Motion: Cinema and the Aesthetics of Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> See the short report on the digitization project: Jeanne Pommeau and Jiří Anger, “The Digitization of Jan Kříženecký’s Films,” *Illuminace* 31, no. 1 (2019), 104–107.

functioning of the Lumière camera (Cinématographe-type) that Kříženecký used. This strangely hybrid form enabled me to perceive weird shapes that one usually does not encounter among the rips, dots, and dust in stock archival footage nor in crystal-clear digitally restored films. Material-technological elements – not only more traditional damages like splices or scratches but also intrinsic deformations such as a yellowish-orange color layer, marks of static electricity, or camera instability – impinge upon the form and content of the moving images to such an extent that they endow the moving images with speculatively and aesthetically generative features.





Figures 1–5: The Films of Jan Kříženecký: *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge* (Slavnostní vysvěcení mostu císaře Františka I.; 1901, source: nitrate print); *The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague* (První den jarních dostihů pražských; 1908, source: original negative); *Opening Ceremony of the Čech Bridge* (Slavnost otevření nového Čechova mostu; 1908, source: original negative);<sup>9</sup> *An Assignment in the Mill* (Dostaveníčko ve mlýnici; 1898, source: nitrate print); *Laughter and Tears* (Smích a pláč; 1898, source: nitrate print) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

The color veil, the horse hit by lightning, the trembling bridge, the scratched kiss, and the Frankensteinian face you see in Figures 1–5 present fruitful exercises in accidental aesthetics, and in many ways, they could be understood as exemplary cinephiliac details. Yet, they also pose a significant challenge to the existing theoretical frameworks in at least two respects. First, these weird gestalts emerge from clashes between two spheres: the *figurative*, what is represented in the image and how it is formally composed, and the *material*, a technological apparatus that ceases to be a supporting actor and actively shapes what is visible (or invisible) in the film. Previous accounts of filmic details and contingencies generally made no ontological or epistemological differentiation between details that emerge within the figurative content (wind in the trees) and details that arise from physical degradation or deformation (face covered by scratches). In the latter case, there are surely many passages in theoretical and essayistic articles that describe in minute detail how a certain physical element disrupts representation, but rarely do they analyze the specific figurative-material assemblage that unfolds as a result. A theorization of the digitized films of Jan Kříženecký (or “Digital Kříženecký”) should therefore ask questions about the specific relationship between figuration and materiality that gives birth to these elements. Under what conditions do the figurative and material dimensions

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<sup>9</sup> The camera trembling in *Opening Ceremony* is better visible in GIF format (see Chapter 3). Retrieved from: <https://gfycat.com/mealydistantduckbillcat>. A shorter version is available here: <https://gfycat.com/badseparatebluetickcoonhound>.

begin to communicate? Is the clash between figuration and materiality necessarily staged by external actors, or is it rather a tension that is always already present within the films? When the figurative and material elements assemble into a gestalt, do their differences evaporate, or do they continue to co-exist as distinct entities and maintain their specificities?

Second, conceptualizations that focus on material details rarely delve into their origin. The damages and distortions we encounter in archival footage and films that appropriate it are often treated as universal signifiers – of decay, cinematic indexicality, historicity, ruin, the passage of time, and other such concepts. Never mind whether they are large blobs or small dots, whether they interact with the figurative content or seem completely detached from it, whether they appear in anonymous stock footage or specifically designed experimental films, whether they surface on nitrate prints or their digital copies – the details always indicate the same larger-than-life phenomena. Of course, the weird shapes in Kříženecký's films can (and should) be related to many of these big concepts; however, it would be preferable if this occurred in accordance with the terms determined by the distinctive qualities of each detail. Before a material sign is understood to signify anything about the film medium and the world in general, it ought to be subjected to questions such as: What kind of deformation is it? Did it originate in the film's production process, or is it a product of later interventions, either accidental or purposeful? How does it relate to the image's figurative content? Does it affect the film to the extent that it creates forms and figures in its own right? What can this deformation teach us about archival film, found footage, or, more broadly, about the ontology and epistemology of moving image media?

## **Research Context**

If we want to examine the recently digitized films of Jan Kříženecký from the current point of view, as complex and hybrid archival artifacts rather than works embedded within early cinematic practices in the Czech lands, Austro-Hungarian Empire, or Eastern Europe, we should start by contextualizing them within the two families they are closest to. The first can

be called “archival film” or “archival footage.”<sup>10</sup> The so-called “archival turn”<sup>11</sup> in the last few decades has shifted scholarly attention beyond the dusty contents of archives to focus on the archival impulse as a symptomatic mode of experience. This impulse is characteristic not only by its desire to preserve the past despite the passing of time but also by a latent “utopian fantasy of understanding experience through fragments,” as Jennifer Lynn Peterson claims.<sup>12</sup> Thanks to mass digitization, the range of audiovisual phenomena that can be considered archival has increased significantly, as has the number of techniques by which we can manipulate images to make the past that is etched within them more comprehensible and less disturbing. Under these circumstances, it makes sense to describe archival footage in terms of what Jaimie Baron terms the “archive effect.”<sup>13</sup> Conceiving archival documents and their various uses as an “experience of reception,”<sup>14</sup> they evoke the archive effect when they “offer us a glimpse of the world that existed but has been erased and overlaid with different faces, current fashions, and new technologies.”<sup>15</sup> This temporal disparity, a perceptual distance between “then” and “now,” between the fragments of a past world and the feeling of nostalgia that this world is lost forever, structures what we value in archival films and what we do not.

When considering Digital Kříženecký, the archive effect is inherent, albeit in a strangely twisted manner. Although the digitization strived to respect the nuances of the original nitrate prints and negatives, the films surely do not overcome the gap between how we perceive the images in the present and how they might have been received in the past. The non-interventionist approach to digitization does not necessarily make the resulting artifacts more “authentic,” but it highlights the struggle between different time epochs and different media and makes categories like “then” and “now or “before” and “after” increasingly difficult to maintain. This is one of the reasons why film restorer Jeanne Pommeau decided not to refer to the project as

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<sup>10</sup> For the definition of archival footage, see Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London: Routledge, 2014); Giovanna Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*. Third Revised Edition (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018); Catherine Russell, *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Katherine Groo, *Bad Film Histories: Ethnography and the Early Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); Sylvie Lindeperg and Ania Szczepanska, *Who Owns the Images?* (Lüneburg: meson press, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example: Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Lynn Peterson, “Cinema, Nature, and Endangerment,” in *Ends of Cinema*, eds. Richard Grusin and Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillese (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 53–78.

<sup>13</sup> Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

“digital restoration.” According to her, digital retouching would, especially in the cases of significantly deteriorating film materials, inevitably lead to creating the films anew.<sup>16</sup> In other terms, how can we return the images to their original form and historical context if this is not allowed by the condition of the film stock and the lack of functional technological dispositif from the period in which it was made? How can we resurrect even a glimpse of the past world in, for example, *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge* (1901), in which the original event is buried deep beyond a colored layer full of various distortions? The films of Jan Křítěnecký may be treasured as pioneering works of Czech cinema, but the state of the film materials (particularly the vintage prints) and the digitization method situate them more within what Katherine Groo terms “bad film histories.” Her “particularist approach to film historiography” enables us to take “the absences, imperfections, and discontinuities [...] as crucial concepts and methodological coordinates rather than obstacles to be overcome or resolved.”<sup>17</sup>

The second family, closely aligned with the first one, is experimental found footage. The ambiguous term “found footage” is generally understood as a creative method founded on recycling and reusing existing footage in a different context, usually to reveal hidden meanings or deconstructing meanings that are conventionally accepted.<sup>18</sup> In its experimental variation – from its origins in the late 1960s and 1970s with pioneers such as Ken Jacobs, Ernie Gehr, or Al Razutis, through its second “golden age” during the 1990s and early 2000s with artists like Bill Morrison, Peggy Ahwesh, Matthias Müller, or Peter Tscherkassky, up to the contemporary period with works from Péter Lichter, Bori Máté, and others – the accent is precisely on the tension between figurative content and its material-technological underpinnings. Material components of the film medium – analog, digital, or hybrid – are put to use in order to “walk the line between figuration and abstraction.”<sup>19</sup> While the aesthetic effects of archival footage on its own derive mostly from temporal disparity, the appropriation of pre-existing footage in

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<sup>16</sup> Pommeau and Anger, “The Digitization of Jan Křítěnecký’s Films,” 106.

<sup>17</sup> Groo, *Bad Film Histories*, 8–9.

<sup>18</sup> For a general definition of found footage, see, for example: William Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993); Paul Arthur, “Bodies, Language, and the Impeachment of Vision,” in Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-garde Film Since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 132–150; Christa Blümlinger, *Kino aus zweiter Hand. Zur Ästhetik materieller Aneignung im Film und in der Medienkunst* (Berlin: vorwerk 8, 2009); André Habib and Michel Marie, eds., *L’avenir de la mémoire. Patrimoine, restauration et réemploi cinématographiques* (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2013); Jihoon Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital: Hybrid Moving Images in the Post-Media Age* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 145–195.

<sup>19</sup> Alejandro Bachmann, “The Trace of Walk That Has Taken Place – A Conversation with Peter Tscherkassky,” *Found Footage Magazine* 4, no. 4 (2018), 30.



experimental cinema highlights “intentional disparity”<sup>20</sup> (although the archive effect involves both forms of disparity). This means that the distance between the current perception of the footage and how it was created and received in the time of its creation is not only made visible but further deepened – either by numerous kinds of physical intervention (scratching, painting on the film, shaking the camera, burying the film under the ground, digital glitching, and others)<sup>21</sup> or by more subtle curatorial tactics that leave the archival footage mostly as-is and rather select the fragments that fit the artist’s intentions and find ways how to make certain elements more perceptible and resonant (for example, slow motion, zoom, music, and so forth).

Although Digital Kříženecký should naturally fall into the archival footage category, many gestalts emerging from the films bear a strong resemblance to experimental found footage works. Some of the weird shapes – such as the blobs stretching on the yellowish-orange layer in *Grand Consecration* (Fig. 1) – recall images that filmmakers like Bill Morrison would choose for their symphonies of decay. Others – such as the trembling bridge in *Opening Ceremony of the Čech Bridge* (Fig. 3 GIF) – look like intentionally orchestrated experiments with the limits of cinematic motion in the vein of Ken Jacobs. The films of Jan Kříženecký remind us that the place of the author in found footage filmmaking is much more unobtrusive than the existing scholarship, which typically champions selected filmmakers as grand auteurs, would have us believe. At the same time, Jacobs’s statement that “a lot of film is perfect left alone, perfectly revealing in its unconscious or semi-conscious form”<sup>22</sup> might be overstated – the appropriator is still the one who chooses and shapes the material. Nevertheless, Kříženecký’s films show that many aesthetic effects displayed in celebrated works by experimental artists can be accomplished through serendipity – an accident that stems as much from the predispositions of film technology as from the power of indexicality, from its analog origin as well as its digital simulation. If film theory and history focused less on the achievements of individuals and more on the autonomous creativity of distinctive material traces and gestures, the examination of found footage could yield a significantly richer and more varied range of details.

## Methodology

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<sup>20</sup> Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Kim Knowles, *Experimental Film and Photochemical Practices* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> Ken Jacobs, “Perfect Film,” *Light Cone*, accessed 20 September 2021. <https://lightcone.org/en/film-4154-perfect-film>.

If the main point of interest concerning found footage and archival film practices is the tension between figuration and materiality, it is worth delineating both of the terms between which this tension arises. Starting with the latter, Digital Kříženecký revives many long-term debates on the ontology of the photographic image, connections between analog materiality and indexicality, or the death of cinema as a metaphor for the inherent vulnerability and mortality of filmic matter. Kříženecký's films, often monstrously deformed and virtually unrestorable, demonstrate that the aesthetic function of the moving image is ontologically tied to the material world. Since its birth, the film print succumbs to natural and mechanical laws: not only does it gradually deteriorate and lose its contours, it heads closer to ruination simply by passing through the projecting machine, and this does not even take into account the intentional or unintentional interventions by human or non-human actors. One would think that digital film would be spared these mechanisms, but its entwinement in the processes of compression and decompression suggests otherwise. Not for nothing does Paolo Cherchi Usai emphasize that "cinema is the art of moving image destruction."<sup>23</sup> Following Jurij Meden, we need to dispute "the notion of [wear and tear] being an unwanted side effect" and affirm it as "the unavoidable constant."<sup>24</sup> As much as people (including film theorists) tend to perceive filmic matter as representation's "Other," we should acknowledge that the "history of cinema is a history of scratches, tears, burns, blurry images, delayed changeovers, missing frames, imperfect framings, [and] random speeds."<sup>25</sup>

As should be evident by now, Digital Kříženecký does not attempt to escape this ontological death drive, but rather embraces it and distributes it among a multitude of material actors. The analog-digital dichotomy is no longer sufficient to account for the phenomena taking place on the surface of the films. We have to deal with severe physical deformations as well as subtle digital artifacts or dead pixels; distortions inherent to the Lumière technology as well as those caused by temporal degradation, external intervention, or inappropriate conversion; together

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<sup>23</sup> Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark Age* (London: BFI, 2001), 6. For more on the "death of cinema" discourse, see, for example, Mary Ann Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," *Differences* 18, no. 1 (2007), 128–152; D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007); André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Bernd Herzogenrath, ed., *The Films of Bill Morrison: Aesthetics of the Archive* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017); Richard Grusin and Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillese, *Ends of Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020). For the general methodology of materialist media theory, see Grant Bollmer, *Materialist Media Theory: An Introduction* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Jurij Meden, *Scratches and Glitches: Observations on Preserving and Exhibiting Cinema in the Early 21st Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–26.

with intrusions by both humans (either Jan Kříženecký or later anonymous lab workers) and non-humans (bacteria, fungi, algorithms, and so forth) all on the same plane. Jihoon Kim's notion of "hybrid moving images," an "array of impure image forms characterized by the interrelation of the material, technical, and aesthetic components of existing moving image media,"<sup>26</sup> presents a useful framework for understanding the distributed materiality of Kříženecký's digitized films. Kim's conception also allows for a concrete "dialectic of medium specificity and hybridity" – "what makes a hybrid cannot be understood if the individual properties being combined cannot be distinguished."<sup>27</sup> Also, Katherine Groo's theorization of hybridity in digitized archival films – more specifically, the badly damaged fragments of early ethnographic cinema from the collections of the EYE Film Institute Netherlands – can help us situate the chaotic mixture of material elements in Kříženecký's films from the perspective of archival fragments rather than experimental art. Still, much work remains to be done to explain how material phenomena such as color layer, camera trembling, or static electricity construct or reconstruct this hybridity, as well as the impact of digitizing in 4K quality, which significantly lowers the level of compression. In this endeavor, the existing theoretical accounts of filmic ontology and materiality go hand in hand with archival research on film technology (especially that which focuses on the issues of digital preservation and restoration).<sup>28</sup>

The definition of figuration in the present context is somewhat tricky, as the term evokes numerous, sometimes even contradictory, associations. I employ the concept in two meanings, with the first one being more pragmatic and the second one laden with poststructuralist overtones.<sup>29</sup> In its pragmatic meaning figuration is more or less synonymous with the figurative content, that is, the events, people, and objects originally depicted in the footage and how they are formally organized within the respective scenes, shots, or frames. In this sense, it resembles well-worn theoretical concepts as "representation" or "diegesis;" whereas figuration in the

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<sup>26</sup> Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–7.

<sup>28</sup> See particularly: Leo Enticknap, *Film Restoration: The Culture and Science of Audiovisual Heritage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Kerstin Parth, Oliver Hanley and Thomas Ballhausen (eds.), *Work/s in Progress: Digital Film Restoration Within Archives* (Vienna: SYNEMA, 2013); Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: A Guide to Study, Research and Curatorship* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019); Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel*; Benoît Turquety, *Inventing Cinema: Machines, Gestures and Media History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

<sup>29</sup> For more on the tradition of figural thinking, see, for example: Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (London: Vintage, 2002); D. N. Rodowick, *Reading for the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001); Jana Žilová, "Figural Thinking: Theory and Practice" (PhD diss., Charles University in Prague, 2014); Tomáš Jirsa, *Disformations: Affects, Media, Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

poststructuralist vein also suggests something more fluid and transformative. Considering that the focus of my research is examining moments when discernible figures undergo deformation due to the activities of material agents, allusions to the paintings of Francis Bacon are hardly evitable. It was perhaps Gilles Deleuze who expressed most poignantly what continues to fascinate us about Bacon's works – how figurative bodies are being disarticulated by invisible forces of uncertain origin, only to emerge as figures when they are placed into new relations with other figures.<sup>30</sup> The face of actor Josef Šváb-Malostranský in Fig. 5 undergoes similar pressure from external forces – in this case, manifested by a splice – and transfigures into a stitched, deranged head, part Šváb and part Frankenstein's monster. Therefore, the tension lies not only between materiality and figuration but also between the figurative content, its physical deformation, and the figure (for example, the horse struck by lightning in Fig. 2 or the Frankensteinian head) that emerges.

My examination of the specific figures is inspired by two interrelated tendencies within film and media studies: one related to cultural affect theory and the other concerned with figuration in animation studies. In both cases, the main preoccupation is whether elements that are minor, fleeting, unfitting, or in-between can also acquire distinctive forms and contours. As I have indicated earlier, phenomenological or poststructuralist approaches to film have often championed elusiveness and rupture only as a way of escaping established categories and structures rather than studying the elusive or disruptive elements for what they are. Within affect theory, Eugenie Brinkema's provocative notion that affects have forms we should actively search for through active close reading<sup>31</sup> once again proved fruitful for my research. If one finds affectively charged figures in details such as Marion's tear in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) or a killer tire in Quentin Dupieux's *Rubber* (2010), why not seek forms in archival films and found footage, with their myriads of blobs, blotches, and blurs that may or may not communicate with the figurative content?

The second trend, associated with a small circle of (now former) doctoral candidates at the University of Chicago (Hannah Frank, Ryan Pierson, Alla Gadassik, Jordan Schonig, and others), aims specifically at studying figures and forms of fleeting or contingent phenomena in

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<sup>30</sup> To avoid confusion with the inserted images, unlike Deleuze I use the word "figure" with a small "f." Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (London: Continuum, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*; Jiří Anger and Tomáš Jirsa, "We Never Took Deconstruction Seriously Enough (On Affects, Formalism, and Film Theory): An Interview with Eugenie Brinkema," *Illuminace* 31, no. 1 (2019), 65–85.

film (particularly animation).<sup>32</sup> For example, Ryan Pierson asked what would happen “if we looked not simply for movement or animacy as such but for figures – arrangements of units that seem to hold themselves together – and forces – units of attraction or repulsion or direction that seem to hold the figures together [...]”<sup>33</sup> From this perspective, the proverbial wind in the trees is not just a contingent event revealed by the camera, but, as Jordan Schonig claims, a conversion of “formless motion into a spatiotemporally bound object by isolating a single point of view and inscribing the temporal flux of movement.”<sup>34</sup> Again, these accounts could help us shift away from the notion that the figures arising from clashes between material and figurative elements are mere curiosities. Even though the trembling persons on a bridge or horses hit by lightning may not have been desired by the maker, they are nevertheless there, fulfilling aesthetic functions and evoking aesthetic effects, as well as revealing a film, a scene, a shot, or indeed a single frame<sup>35</sup> as a battleground where different gestures, traces, temporalities, materialities, and figurations confront each other and participate in the film’s meaning.

The specific clashes between the figurative and material spheres will be understood through the metaphor of a “crack-up.” The weird figures in Kříženecký’s films do not gain and maintain shape within a distinctive interval merely by accident. A conceptual mechanism is needed to describe what brings the supposedly separate dimensions (the figurative and the material) together yet keeps them in check without one erasing the other. In the crack-up (fêlure in French), Gilles Deleuze, following on Francis Scott Fitzgerald’s eponymous essay, finds a fitting term for describing an ontological void that prevents and at the same time enables living existence and, by extension, any meaning that may come out of it. The silent operations of the crack-up continuously pursue their destroying activity without our knowledge, and when they burst onto the surface (when the “volcano replaces the porcelain”), it is already too late to halt them yet always too early to ascribe them meaning. Nevertheless, if we follow the Deleuzian rumination, a real sense can emerge only at the limit of what is sensible, through an encounter with the unthinkable or the non-sensible – in our case, an encounter with a material-technological accident within the figurative image. The crack-up, then, stands for what “runs through and alienates thought in order to be also the possibility of thought.”

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<sup>32</sup> For a representative overview, see the recent *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* dossier “Drawing on the Margins: Animation in Film and Media.” Ryan Pierson, ed., “In Focus: Drawing on the Margins: Animation in Film and Media,” *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 61, no. 1 (2021), 142–184.

<sup>33</sup> Ryan Pierson, *Figure and Force in Animation Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.

<sup>34</sup> Jordan Schonig, “Cinema’s Motion Forms” (PhD diss, 2017), 57–58.

<sup>35</sup> Hannah Frank, *Frame by Frame: A Materialist Aesthetics of Animated Cartoons*. 2019

The crack-up thus serves as a term for a constitutive void of the moving image that simultaneously disrupts and establishes a means of transmission between two discernible modes of cinematic meaning-making – a term that is poetically charged yet visibly manifest in the formal and material features of the image. This way, its strength would reside in the double play of lack and plenitude. The crack-up encapsulates the reciprocity between that which ruptures (supposedly the material) and that which is ruptured (supposedly the figurative). The trembling bridges and scratched kisses in Kříženecký's films do not exhaust themselves in the emptying of meaning: the material deformations obscure neither the figurative content nor the formal composition; instead, they make visible the (media-material) conditions of their presence. And vice versa, the scene is irreducible to the multiplicity of interrelated forces and becomings: what keeps this interplay from disappearing is precisely the void that conditioned the moment in the first place. The charm of the crack-up resides in the ability to contain negativity and productivity, difference and simultaneity, at the same time, even within the tiniest cinematic units.

## **Structure**

The *raison d'être* of this dissertation is to return to the archival objects themselves (however distorted or unrecognizable) and the aesthetic details hidden within them, or more specifically, to the weird shapes that emerge as actualizations of the ontological crack-up between the figurative and material elements. This is why each chapter focuses on a single Kříženecký film, a single cracked-up figure, the single material origin of that figure, and a single theoretical concept or tradition that may undergo transformation by that figure. The dissertation proceeds from the most indistinguishable figures to the relatively discernible, from the physical gestures that derive from the properties of the Lumière film materials (color layer and static marks) and their Cinématographe (camera instability) to later interventions caused by improper handling (vertical scratches) or attempts to sew the damaged film back together (spliced frames). The order of concepts follows a gradual movement from the ontology of film (death of cinema, index) through philosophical interplay (transduction) to the more epistemological and perceptual phenomena (historicity, haptic visuality). Be that as it may, the opening chapters also include epistemological moments, and, vice versa, the closing parts return to ontological questions.

	<b>Film</b>	<b>Crack-Up</b>	<b>Origin</b>	<b>Concept</b>
<b>1</b>	Grand Consecration	Color veil	Yellowish-orange layer	Death of cinema
<b>2</b>	Spring Races	Electric horses	Static marks	Indexicality
<b>3</b>	Opening Ceremony	Trembling bridge	Camera instability	Transduction
<b>4</b>	Assignation	Scratched kiss	Vertical scratches	Historicity
<b>5</b>	Laughter and Tears	Stitched head	Spliced frames	Haptic visuality

What further unites all the chapters is an emphasis on the broader context of found footage and archival film. Experimental found footage works such as Bill Morrison’s *Decasia* (2002), Al Razutis’s *Lumière’s Train, Arriving at the Station* (1979), Sami van Ingen’s *Flame* (2018), Siegfried A. Fruhauf’s *La sortie* (1999), Thom Andersen’s *Eadweard Muybridge, Zoopraxographer* (1975), or Michael Fleming’s *Never Never Land* (2018) provide a comparative foundation for analyzing Kříženecký’s films – not only for addressing similar theoretical issues or employing similar material traces and gestures but also for showing that polished and unpolished forms of the crack-up can be thought of together. Furthermore, films made by (and for) the Lumière Brothers and Edison, early Biograph films, and early ethnographic films from the Eye Institute serve to situate Digital Kříženecký within the problematic realm of archival fragments emerging in the digital landscape and undergoing various degrees of intervention.

Finally, there is another, thus far unmentioned tendency that pervades the dissertation – “videographic criticism.”<sup>36</sup> In many ways, videographic criticism builds upon found footage and archival film practices, albeit in the context of academic film studies. Its approach is based on performing research by means of the moving images and sounds themselves, instead of in a traditional written text, thereby opening up a new epistemology of studying film objects in the digital age and general possibilities of what Bernd Herzogenrath terms “practical aesthetics,” a way of thinking *with* and *through* the artwork, not *about* it (in the sense of imposing external concepts on it).<sup>37</sup> All the chapters involve videographic moments in which the cracked-up figures are examined frame by frame, stopped in an instant of a blur, slowed down almost to the point of freezing, repeated in a loop, or shown as sutured together from different image

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<sup>36</sup> Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant, eds., *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound and Image* (Montreal: caboose, 2019); Volker Pantenburg, “Videographic Film Studies.” In: *Handbuch Filmanalyse*, eds. Malte Hagener and Volker Pantenburg (Berlin: Springer, 2020), 485–502.

<sup>37</sup> Bernd Herzogenrath, “Toward a Practical Aesthetics: Thinking With,” in *Practical Aesthetics*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 1–24.

parts. These subtle operations undertaken with editing software enable us to understand Kříženecký's digitized films as unstable and malleable objects whose actualizations of the crack-up are open to reimagination.

This is why the final chapter – Chapter 6 – involves both a videographic essay and its written elaboration and contextualization. It proposes a practical exercise that discloses a specific crack-up in all of the films together – the one that lies within their opening frames.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout all the six chapters, the forms of the crack-up instantiated by color veils, static marks, camera tremblings, vertical scratches, and spliced frames had to be experienced and scrutinized for what they are – with every detail of their inscription into the figurative content being considered – yet they were simultaneously conceived as potentialities for extending the crack-up into the world and generating new forms of scholarly AND aesthetic thinking. Each chapter of the dissertation was evaluated in terms of how the specific crack-up in a single Kříženecký film reshaped the respective grand concept or theory and in what ways the found footage and videographic operations designed to make the crack-up visible and persistent helped move it closer to potential further actualization.

In Chapter 1, the color veil in *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge* disturbed the death of cinema debates by demonstrating how many possible deaths can be staged on a single image plane – the death of figures frozen in time and obscured by deformed shapes; the death instilled by historical decay (scratches, tears, splices); the death of the Lumière nitrate print embroiled in torn perforations and unstable movement; the death of the colors themselves, turning from bright yellow to rotting red; and, potentially, the death of digital compression and circulation. The color veil that brings these elements together while maintaining their diversity signals the inevitable death of cinema, but also its extension into eternity. The newly found hybridity of Bill Morrison's *Decasia* and the following frame-by-frame approach inspired by Hannah Frank served as a wake-up call that we should not be inhibited by nostalgia and fetishism for the analog. Scholars and archivists should open the digital files in video-editing software, discern and isolate the places which seem the most threatened by material evisceration, and seek to turn their death(s) into an alternative figuration of a life-force to come.



In Chapter 2, the electric horses showed multiple facets of indexicality that unfold when the pro-filmic reality becomes suffused with static electricity. Static marks are often seen as minor elements that found their way into early films by mistake, but some specific configurations in the Lumière films and particularly in Digital Kříženecký display them as features that simultaneously disturb and co-constitute figuration. In *The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague*, our notion of indexical value is conditioned by two blocs of concepts – figuration-materiality and trace-deixis. Our belief in the pro-filmic reality is evoked by shots of the racing event just as much as the involuntary looks and gestures of the characters, by signs of wear and tear (dots, dust, and scratches) just as much as elements that stem from the film's production process (static marks). The sharp, individuated white streaks targeted at the horses and jockeys affect the form and content of the images with such dynamism that they can be examined only when the figurative elements become a blur. The bracketing of the electric horses allows us to expose these paradoxes as instances in which the quadruple logic of indexicality is most potent.

In Chapter 3, the trembling bridge in *Opening Ceremony of the Čech Bridge* encountered transduction, a principle involving both transversal distribution and regulative metastability, as a mechanism with significant aesthetic potential. The analysis in this chapter showed that transductive equilibrium can emerge accidentally, independent of artistic intervention or the ravages of time, through the autonomous creativity of a shaking camera. The only things necessary for revealing this phenomenon were a theoretically generative concept (transduction) and a slow observation of the details of the scene – pursued via the techniques of slow-motion and looping inspired by the experimental films of Ken Jacobs, Al Razutis, and Siegfried A. Fruhauf – that regulates the margin of indeterminacy and allows the moment of transduction to endure. This shift opened up space for a sort of interventionist (but not mastering) scholarship, which should not be content with merely speaking or writing about analog and/or digital matter; instead, it should rather strive to translate the unique materiality of hybrid media art into a creative engagement with the moving images and sounds themselves. In the vein of Shane Denson's videographic manifesto *The Algorithmic Nickelodeon*, this approach would consider deformations of the image/object and displacements of the analyst/subject simultaneously in order to imagine a form of audiovisual criticism for the digital age that would aim not only to analyze and interpret but to reinvent our notion of subject-object relations.

In Chapter 4, the scratched kiss in *An Assignment in the Mill* delineated the archival experience as always-already pervaded with the powers of the false. The vertical scratches emerging at the

divide between the unveiling of the Czech Cinematograph poster and the “first kiss of Czech cinema” reveal that the archive effect does not necessarily depend on temporal disparity, reflective or restorative nostalgia, or appropriative intervention (without denying their value). It is not crucial where, how, by whom, or by what means the rips emerged, nor whether any precise documentation of the event existed prior to such physical deformation. The mere existence of the scratches changes the rules of the game, expressing nothing other than the difficulty of expressing anything vis-à-vis the essential vulnerability of both filmic matter and cinematic firsts. The potential of the scratched kiss as a moment that constantly passes and therefore does not pass can be unveiled in a similar way as in Thom Andersen’s *Eadweard Muybridge, Zoopraxographer*. A stuttering movement that would make the characters’ gestures as well as the scratches constantly appear and disappear, intermingle and diverge, to multiply the number of ways in which the archival document can differ from itself and yet still be understood and felt as archival. It is only through such experiments with the powers of the false that the milestones of (particularly the earliest) cinema can be reprogrammed to give expression to a future image.

In Chapter 5, the stitched head of Josef Šváb-Malostranský in *Laughter and Tears* provoked a reflection on the epistemic preconditions of approaching fragmentary, distorted, and altogether weird film objects in an intimate yet analytically profound way. It argued that some of the established principles of haptic criticism – namely intentional fallacy and negative ontology – will no longer suffice. First, Šváb’s face covered with Frankensteinian stitches is not able to evoke the identification mechanisms that would ease us into thinking that we have been chosen by the film object, and thus it is difficult to fetishize. Second, the peculiar deformations encroaching upon Šváb’s face are not necessarily cinephiliac details waiting to be discovered as their impact on the film is so severe that they cease to be peripheral and threaten to take over the meanings and effects of the film. A selection of stitched frames allowed us to discern specific configurations of the cinematic close-up – a figurative one and a material one. The clashes between these two modalities do not lead to rupture or destruction but create cracked-up figures such as the composite Frankensteinian images in Michael Fleming’s *Never Never Land*. Altogether, this investigation demonstrated how relative categories such as transparency and opacity, human and technological, or detail and whole can be, and how anyone who wants to intervene in the cracked-up film objects must do so with surgical caution.

In Chapter 6, the videographic essay *The First Frames of Czech Cinema* presents the opening images of all of Kříženecký's digitized films as things with complex material histories that pertain to the past and present cinema at the same time. While the essay subjects the frames to multiple digital manipulations (zooming, rotating, stretching, and so forth), paradoxically, it also returns us to the earliest cinematic projections, which often started with the opening images as still photographs. By combining sequential and simultaneous modes of viewing, the videographic work portrays the digitized first frames as irreducible to being erased or marginalized in favor of smooth and continuous flow as well as to being interchangeable blocks in a coherent whole. The crack-up embroiled within these 28 frames shatters any illusion of transparency, fluidity, and compatibility in Digital Kříženecký yet also develops an idea that brings the materials together – no matter how polished the cinematic firsts are, the very first things we see of them are never what they seem to be.

As pointed out in Chapter 6, videographic criticism offers a chance to reconcile the remnants of the archival impulse with the present (and near-future) digital condition, and turn found footage into a form of curatorial and scholarly expression. The deformative/parametric approach is particularly useful for showing that digital humanities need not be merely quantitative, empirical, and oriented towards big data but can just as well be qualitative, poetic, and attuned to detail. This appeal is even more pressing in archival film theory and practice. While some archives and museums (for example, the EYE Film Institute or the Austrian Film Museum) have experimented with videographic essays from time to time,<sup>38</sup> computer-driven archival research has been predominantly associated with the more quantitative strands of digital humanities.<sup>39</sup> Deformative experiments with Kříženecký's films herald a more epistemological role for video-editing software, bringing the very integrity of the already highly unstable and fragmentary archival objects under intensive scrutiny. Not only do the computer-assisted tools allow us to better distinguish between different material traces and gestures in the artifacts, but they also enable us to create additional layers of deformation that unmask the variety of actors that co-constitute archival footage in the digital space. Perhaps such a

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example: "Video essays," *Eyefilm.nl*, accessed September 9, 2021, <https://www.eyefilm.nl/en/watch-and-listen/video-essays>; "Video Essays," *filmmuseum.at*, accessed September 9, 2021, [https://www.filmmuseum.at/en/research\\_education/education/video\\_essays](https://www.filmmuseum.at/en/research_education/education/video_essays).

<sup>39</sup> See: C. G. Olesen, "Film History in the Making" (PhD diss., Amsterdam University, 2017), 149–206; Barbara Flückiger, "A Digital Humanities Approach to Film Colors," *The Moving Image* 17, no. 2 (2017), 71–94; Adelheid Heftberger, *Digital Humanities and Film Studies: Visualising Dziga Vertov's Work* (Berlin: Springer, 2019); Simone Venturini, "From Edge to Edge: The Restoration of *La battaglia dall'Astico al Piave* (1918) and the Search for a Digital Historical-Critical Infrastructure," *Cinergie*, no. 20 (2021), 45–68.

transformation of video-editing programs into machines that dissect film objects into a multitude of cracked-up figures rather than a multitude of data is what can make the current regime of audiovisual abundance a bit more exciting.

Nevertheless, the impact of videographic criticism reaches beyond experimentation with video-editing software. It also bears the promise of a mode of writing that would be academic and, at the same time, perceptive of the conditions that establish any kind of film analysis or interpretation. The fact that film scholars encounter their research object within the variable space of software interfaces and pop-up windows inevitably transforms the terms of this research, and scholarly writing, even with all its centuries-old traditions and rules, should acknowledge this. The way I employed descriptions of videographic manipulations (frame-by-frame, GIF, slow-motion, and so forth) throughout the text was intended not as a gimmick, but an attempt to establish these operations as crucial points of the research process, without which the individual forms of the crack-up would not have been quite as perceptible and theoretically intriguing. Furthermore, the speculations on what would happen to the crack-up if we subjected film X to videographic technique Y underscores a key feature of the main concept – its ambiguity. As important as its concrete forms are, the crack-up, as a place where the never-ending feud between figuration and materiality acquires a (however provisional) shape, is never limited to its current actualization. The proposals for videographic prolongations of the crack-up, usually mentioned in the concluding parts of the chapters, were intended precisely as fulfillments of Deleuzian counter-actualization that could allow the individual forms of the crack-up to become transversal. As a result, my writing may at times seem overly speculative: quoting Hoi Lun Law's recent monograph *Ambiguity and Film Criticism* (2021), "if ambiguity nourishes uncertainty and stimulates reading, then it equally spawns speculations."<sup>40</sup> Yet, the crack-up is precisely the concept and Digital Kříženecký is precisely the body of work that invite such speculations. Considering that "we adhere to the discoveries of poststructuralism, but we write as if the only guides to writing were written by Cicero and Quintilian,"<sup>41</sup> as James Elkins claims, a work that actualizes (or counter-actualizes?) the poststructuralist impulse, these alterations to established scholarly writing shall be more than welcome.

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<sup>40</sup> Hoi Lun Law, *Ambiguity and Film Criticism: Reasonable Doubt* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 57.

<sup>41</sup> James Elkins, *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing: North Atlantic Art History and Its Alternatives* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), 206.

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## Jiří Anger – CV

Jiří Anger is a doctoral candidate in film studies at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, in Prague. He is also an editor for the peer-reviewed academic journal *Illuminace* and curator and researcher at the National Film Archive (Národní filmový archiv) in Prague. Anger's research focuses on archival film, experimental cinema, and videographic criticism. His texts and videos have appeared in journals such as *NECSUS*, *The Moving Image*, *Film-Philosophy*, *[in]Transition or Studies in Eastern European Cinema*. He is the author of the monograph *Afekt, výraz, performance: Proměny melodramatického excesu v kinematografii těla* (Affect, Expression, Performance: Transformation of the Melodramatic Excess in the Cinema of the Body, 2018).

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### **Selected editorial work**

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*Černý Petr / Black Peter* BD (Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2018). [DVD Awards Finalist 2018, Il Cinema Ritrovato Bologna]

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Experimental Film, Video Art, and the Borders of Cinema, Queen Mary University of London, May 25–27, 2022: “Keep That Image Burning: Digital Kříženecký and the Autonomous Creativity of Archival Footage.” [upcoming]

Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference, Chicago, March 31–April 3, 2022: “Excavation as Estrangement: Videographic Practice at the Czech National Film Archive.” [upcoming]

Teritoria umění, Akademie múzických umění v Praze, November 12, 2021: “Cinefilie ve věku algoritmů: Úvod do praktické teorie filmu a umění.”

The NECS 2021 Conference: Transitions: Moving Images and Bodies, University of Palermo, June 7–13, 2021: “Always Already Deformed: Digital Kříženecký and the Crack-Up of Czech Archival Film.”

A Season of Classic Films | Where, How and to Whom – the challenges of presenting earliest cinema, June 3, 2021.

Migrating Archives of Reality: Programming, Curating, and Appropriation on Non-Fiction Film, Institute of Contemporary History, CAS, Prague, May 6–7, 2021: “Shaping the Unshapeable? Digital Kříženecký and Videographic (Re)Imagination of Early Czech Cinema.”

Genre/Nostalgia, University of Hertfordshire, January 5–6, 2021: The Milestone That Never Happened: “Digital Kříženecký, False Archive Effect, and the Failed Beginning of Czech Cinema.”

Alternative Research Forum: Desktop Cinema, Alternative Film Video Festival, Belgrade, December 11, 2020: “Distant Journey Through the Desktop.”

Creating Insights: Research and Aesthetic Discovery in the Video Essay, Merz Akademie, Stuttgart, December 6–7, 2019: “Cinephilia Viewed Through Algorithms.”

### **Grants and projects**

2020 – 2022 Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World, WP1.4 Research of Creative Industries (Doctoral position)

2018 – 2021 Progres Q12: Literatura a performativita (Affiliated PhD student)