

Abstract

Would it be possible to do film theory “from below,” from the perspective of a film object, of its multifarious details and facets, however marginal, unintentional, or aleatory they might be? 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? The body of work that poses these kinds of questions surfaced with the digitization of the “first Czech films,” made by Jan Kříženecký between 1898 and 1911. While the digitized films benefit from high-definition picture quality, achieved by scanning the materials in 4K, the deformations present in the materials were not effaced but made all the more visible in the image. Thus, formerly analog elements impinge upon the form and content of the moving images to such an extent that they create speculatively and aesthetically generative figures and shapes. With the help of digital technology, we can isolate and zoom in on these features yet also experiment with how they can be reimagined.

The aim of this dissertation is to account for the weird shapes that emerge when the material elements interact with the figurative content of the moving image. In Kříženecký’s films, the individual deformations (including the intrinsic features of the early Lumière film technology such as a yellowish-orange color layer, marks of static electricity, or camera instability) often create accidental aesthetic configurations that show the moving image as always already torn between distinct yet communicating dimensions. The specific clashes between the figurative and material spheres are understood through the metaphor of a “crack-up.” This term, coined by Francis Scott Fitzgerald and theoretically reimagined by Gilles Deleuze, allows us to capture the schizophrenic relationship between figuration and materiality, containing negativity and productivity, difference and simultaneity, at the same time, even within the tiniest cinematic units.