

CHARLES UNIVERSITY IN PRAGUE

FACULTY OF ARTS

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

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Submitted: 2022

Acknowledgments

The road towards the present concept of this dissertation was quite bumpy and involved many twists and turns, including a change of topic, a change of language, and a change of supervisor. Therefore, many people whom I wish to thank encountered my project at a stage when it was shaping up to be something different from the resulting thesis, while others who helped me throughout the years did not even know they contributed to the actual dissertation. I feel the need to list them all (or at least those I have not reprehensibly forgotten).

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor Lucie Česálková, who has mentored me during the early years of my professional career both as editor-in-chief of *Illuminace: The Journal of Film Theory, History, and Aesthetics* and as a senior colleague at the Research Support Department at the National Film Archive (Národní filmový archiv), Prague. After becoming part of the Department of Film Studies, she took over my dissertation and helped me refine the main research problem and line of argumentation while also offering crucial insight into the details and nuances of the manuscript.

The second supervisor, Bernd Herzogenrath (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt), proved to be a key inspiration in developing a film theory “from below,” a way of thinking *with* films as material objects. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic finally allowed me to spend a semester at Goethe-Universität under his tutelage, we had many (offline or online) opportunities to discuss the theoretical grounding of my dissertation, and the scholarship in Frankfurt in Spring 2021 only deepened that.

Of course, the dissertation would not have materialized without intense debates with the members of “our” Department of Film Studies. Kateřina Svatoňová, head of the department and a former supervisor of my thesis, deserves gratitude for guiding me throughout the early stages of my doctoral studies and offering me many opportunities for teaching lectures, seminars, and practical workshops on film theory and aesthetics. Many thanks must go to all the professors and students who participated in our doctoral seminars: besides those already mentioned, Jakub Jiříšně, Ivan Klimeš, Petr Szczepanik, and Marek Šindelka gave me particularly piercing and incisive feedback. Special acknowledgment belongs to fellow doctoral students and dear friends Martin Mišůr and Tereza Frodlová: the former commented

upon various stages of the manuscript, while the latter tutored me into the basics of digital restoration and preservation and archival practice as a whole.

As the following pages testify, my work at the National Film Archive shaped the dissertation in a significant way. The fascination with the films of Jan Kříženecký stemmed from my experience as a curator of the DVD / Blu-ray release *The Films of Jan Kříženecký* that presented all the surviving original film materials of the so-called “first Czech filmmaker” for the first time in a digitized form. During this project, I had a chance to cooperate closely with the restoration team and examine the films in meticulous detail. My gratitude belongs to Jeanne Pommeau, whose radical decision to leave even the most distorted films without digital retouching ensured that the deformations and crack-ups investigated in this dissertation could be seen. Other people who contributed to the digitization and research of Kříženecký’s films include: Michal Bregant, Jonáš Kucharský, Rémi Llorens, Jaroslav Lopour, Matěj Strnad, Jonáš Svatoš, Alena Šlingerová, Jan Trnka (of course, there are many others). All in all, the Research Support Department (Martina Nalevanková, Linda Šplíchalová, Soňa Weigertová, and co.) provided an extremely helpful and friendly environment for the project, and also for my ongoing research endeavors, for which I am particularly grateful.

There are numerous people I would like to thank for discussing the dissertation with me and/or reading parts of the manuscript at various stages of completion. In alphabetical order, excluding those I have already mentioned: Tomáš Bazika, Ladislav Cubr, Tomáš Jirsa, Kateřina Krtilová, Terezie Límanová, Bori Máté, Ewa Mazierska, Devin Orgeron, Eszter Polónyi, David Sorfa, Josef Vojvodík (+ anonymous reviewers of my articles). Comments on my conference presentations from scholars and curators such as Ewa Ciszewska, Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann, Tone Føreland, Šárka Gmitterková, Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi, and Christa van Raalte were also of immense help. Eye-opening moments came from my involvement in the videographic scene: Johannes Binotto, Evelyn Kreutzer, or Kevin B. Lee made me think about Kříženecký and archival/found footage in ways that transcend the theory-practice divide. Again, the National Film Archive proved crucial in turning these ideas into practice: it provided grounds for creating a videographic essay, *The First Frames of Czech Cinema* (co-authored by Adéla Kudlová), which serves as a supplement of this dissertation. Final grammar and stylistic corrections were courtesy of Kevin Johnson, aka The Best Proofreader in the World; throughout the writing process, the *Grammarly* software was an invaluable companion.

However, the biggest thank you goes to my closest friends, relatives, and pets. Chiefly, Veronika Hanáková, my intimate partner in crime and a promising media scholar in her own right, went through all the stages of the project with me, offering precious feedback as well as emotional support.

Note:

The actual manuscript has gradually developed out of parts that were often first presented separately as studies or conference papers. The article “Found footage efekt: Digitální Kříženecký a prasklina filmového média” published in *Illuminace* in 2019 was a then unsuspected predecessor to the introductory part of the dissertation. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 had their early precursors in articles for *The Moving Image* (“Keep That Image Burning: Digital Kříženecký, Color Veil, and the Cinema That Never Stops Ending”), *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* (“Do Archivists Dream of Electric Horses? Digital Kříženecký, Static Electricity, and the Quadruple Logic of Indexicality”), and *Film-Philosophy* (“Trembling Meaning: Camera Instability and Gilbert Simondon’s Transduction in Czech Archival Film”). Outlines for Chapters 4 and 6 were presented at international conferences: the former at the “Genre/Nostalgia” conference in Hertfordshire (“The Milestone That Never Happened: Digital Kříženecký, False Archive Effect, and the Failed Beginning of Czech Cinema”), the latter at the “Migrating Archives of Reality” conference in Prague (“Shaping the Unshapeable? Digital Kříženecký and Videographic (Re)Imagination of Early Czech Cinema”). General theses of the dissertation were, in one way or another, also presented at “The NECS 2021 Conference” in Palermo or the “Experimental Film, Video Art, and the Borders of Cinema” conference in London.

“I hereby state that I have written this dissertation on my own using only the stated, fully quoted bibliographic references and that this research has not been used in the framework of another university study program or to gain another or the same title.”

Prague, January 19, 2022

Jiří Anger

Keywords:

Archival footage; found footage; early cinema; digitization; materiality; figuration; crack-up; videographic criticism; Jan Kříženecký

Klíčová slova:

Archivní film; found footage; raný film; digitalizace; materialita; figurace; prasklina; videografická kritika; Jan Kříženecký

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.

Abstrakt v češtině

Bylo by možné dělat filmovou teorii „zdola“, z perspektivy filmového objektu, jeho roztodivných detailů a odstínů, ať už jsou jakkoli okrajové, nezáměrné nebo aleatorní? Mohli bychom s nahodilými figurativními a materiálními prvky v pohyblivých obrazech zacházet jako s plnohodnotnými estetickými aktéry se specifickými formami, funkcemi a účinky a rozeznatelným původem a genealogií? Dílo, které tyto otázky klade, se vynořilo s digitalizací „prvních českých filmů“, které natočil Jan Kříženecký v letech 1898–1911. Digitalizované filmy sice těží z vysoké kvality obrazu, kterou umožnilo skenování materiálů ve 4K rozlišení, deformace přítomné v originálních materiálech však nebyly vyretušovány, nýbrž o to více zviditelněny. Původní analogové prvky tak zasahují do formy a obsahu pohyblivých obrazů do té míry, že vytvářejí spekulativně a esteticky generativní rysy pohyblivých obrazů. S pomocí digitální technologie můžeme tyto detaily izolovat a přiblížit, ale zároveň experimentovat s tím, jak je lze přetvořit a promyslet nanovo.

Cílem této disertační práce je teoreticky uchopit podivné tvary, které vznikají, když materiálně-technologické prvky pronikají do figurativního obsahu pohyblivého obrazu. V Kříženeckého filmech jednotlivé deformace (včetně neodmyslitelných rysů rané lumièreovské filmové technologie, jako je žlutooranžová barevná vrstva, stopy statické elektřiny nebo nestabilita kamery) často vytvářejí nahodilé estetické konfigurace, které odhalují pohyblivý obraz jako vždy již rozpolcený mezi odlišnými, ale navzájem komunikujícími dimenzemi. Konkrétní střety mezi figurativní a materiální sférou budou chápány prostřednictvím metafory „praskliny“. Tento termín, jehož autorem je Francis Scott Fitzgerald a jež teoreticky aktualizoval Gilles Deleuze, umožňuje zachytit schizofrenní vztah mezi figurací a materialitou, zahrnující současně negativitu i produktivitu, diferenci i simultaneitu, a to i v rámci těch nejmenších filmových jednotek.

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Introduction: Starting from the Crack-Up

“And then, ten years this side of forty-nine, I suddenly realized I had prematurely *cracked*.”¹ With these melodramatic words, Francis Scott Fitzgerald closes the opening litany of his essay “The Crack-Up,” published in the *Esquire* magazine in 1936. Here, and in the following two confessional texts,² he reflects on the life trajectory that led him from a young, self-confident, and successful novelist to a seemingly washed-up, middle-aged alcoholic who is no longer sure of his identity. The author found himself empty of values, with “a feeling that [he] was standing at twilight on a deserted range, with an empty rifle in [his] hands and the targets down. No problem set -- simply a silence with only the sound of [his] own breathing.”³ Despite having nothing much in common with the iconic American writer, and despite my life experience being nowhere near as dramatic as his, on the brink of starting to write this dissertation, Fitzgerald’s laments seemed oddly relatable.

At one point, sometime in 2019, I felt that the way I had been doing film theory/philosophy had hit a dead end. As much as the ongoing research on affect, body genres, and experimental cinema meant to me,⁴ I came to believe that it is still too invested in a “top-down” scheme of analysis. No matter how much the individual films and filmmakers fascinated me, I somehow felt the need to scrutinize them according to methodological frameworks (such as affect theory) and in the context of big categories (such as melodrama or experimental cinema). While I had always sought to discover ways in which idiosyncratic works of art (e.g., Werner Schroeter’s *The Death of Maria Malibran*) disturb these concepts, ways whereby they connect the concepts in an unexpected way, or even transform them, at the same time I struggled to account for what makes the films truly specific AND speculatively generative. In this, I did not necessarily mean specific on the larger level of narration or diegesis, but within the tiniest units themselves – scenes, shots, even single frames. It is not that I had been ignoring these micro-levels, yet even the most minuscule details and micro-movements I discovered were

¹ Francis Scott Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up,” *Esquire*, 1936, accessed September 20, 2021, <https://www.esquire.com/lifestyle/a4310/the-crack-up/>.

² All the three essays – “The Crack-Up,” “Pasting It Together,” and “Handle with Care” – were later published in Fitzgerald’s posthumous collection *The Crack-Up*. Francis Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up* (New York: New Directions, 1945).

³ Francis Scott Fitzgerald, “Pasting It Together,” *Esquire*, 1936, accessed September 20, 2021, <https://www.esquire.com/lifestyle/a4310/the-crack-up/>.

⁴ Jiří Anger, “(Un)Frozen Expressions: Melodramatic moment, affective interval, and the transformative powers of experimental cinema,” *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies* 8, no. 2 (2019), 25–47.

still all too visible, all too intentional, all too representational, and for these reasons all too ready to be subsumed under grand theories and concepts.

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.⁵ 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.⁶ Numerous explorations of affect, sensation, and haptic visibility, inspired mainly by phenomenology and poststructuralism,⁷ also promised to conceptualize moving images in terms of what disrupts, resists, or unsettles, what “happens too quickly to have happened.”⁸ 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)⁹ 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,”¹⁰ such contingent elements are way too often valued not for their distinctive traits, but for the simple fact of being contingent, and thereby conforming to

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

⁶ 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).

⁷ 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).

⁸ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 30.

⁹ 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).

¹⁰ 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.

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 and movements this wind may acquire in different works of art,¹¹ 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 filmic details and accidents as full-fledged actors with distinctive aesthetic forms, functions, and effects and discernible origins and genealogies. Nonetheless, 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 such 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.¹² 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 distortions inherent in the material properties of the original nitrate prints and negatives as well as those resulting from the mechanical 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

¹¹ 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).

¹² 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.

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 0.1–0.5: The Films of Jan Křítěnecký: *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);¹³ *An Assigination 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 0.1–0.5 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 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,

¹³ 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>.

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?

Such questions about the highly specific yet uncertain status of accidental details in Kříženecký’s films are the stuff of which this dissertation is made. The first of its main themes addresses the contexts in which the digitized films of Jan Kříženecký find themselves – as *archival film* and *experimental found footage*. This is followed by an overview of two key terms that circulate throughout the work and whose meaning may be sometimes unclear – *figuration* and *materiality*. Finally, the concept of the *crack-up* is introduced; this term coined by Francis Scott Fitzgerald and theoretically reimagined by Gilles Deleuze metaphorically encompasses all the clashes between figurative and material elements from which the weird shapes in Digital Kříženecký emerge.

Found Footage and Archival Film Studies

If we want to examine the recently digitized films of Jan Kříženecký from the present 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.”¹⁴ The so-called “archival turn”¹⁵ in the last

¹⁴ 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).

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.¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ Conceiving archival documents and their various uses as an “experience of reception,”¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹ 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 National Film Archive restorer Jeanne Pommeau decided not to refer to the project as “digital restoration.” According to her, digital retouching would, especially in the cases of significantly deteriorating film materials, inevitably lead to creating the films anew.²⁰ 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*

¹⁵ See, for example: Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ Baron, *The Archive Effect*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁰ Pommeau and Anger, “The Digitization of Jan Kříženecký’s Films,” 106.

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 Kříženecký 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.”²¹

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 deconstruct the meanings that are conventionally accepted.²² 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.”²³ While the aesthetic effects of archival footage on its own derive mostly from temporal disparity, the appropriation of pre-existing footage in experimental cinema highlights “intentional disparity”²⁴ (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

²¹ Groo, *Bad Film Histories*, 8–9.

²² 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;

²³ Alejandro Bachmann, “The Trace of Walk That Has Taken Place – A Conversation with Peter Tscherkassky,” *Found Footage Magazine* 4, no. 4 (2018), 30.

²⁴ Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 23.

ground, digital glitching, and others)²⁵ 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. 0.1) – 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. 0.3 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”²⁶ 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.

Throughout the dissertation, Digital Kříženecký is portrayed as a body of work that simultaneously conforms to and problematizes the existing contexts of archival film and experimental found footage filmmaking. Whether the tension between figuration and materiality is produced by artistic intervention, the ravages of time, or inherent technological properties, comes down to a “difference of degree” rather than a “difference of kind,” as

²⁵ Kim Knowles, *Experimental Film and Photochemical Practices* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

²⁶ Ken Jacobs, “Perfect Film,” *Light Cone*, accessed September 20, 2021. <https://lightcone.org/en/film-4154-perfect-film>.

Henri Bergson would have it.²⁷ Still, merely by pointing out similarities and differences we can account for those weird moments when the materiality of the medium intrudes upon the meaning of the image, not only through deforming, distorting, or twisting it, but also in ways that make it appear as though it has always-already been present, both in its form and content, and was just waiting to be actualized.

Between Materiality and Figuration

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.”²⁸ 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.”²⁹ As much as people (including film theorists) tend to perceive filmic matter as representation's “Other,” we should acknowledge that the “history of cinema

²⁷ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1990).

²⁸ 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, eds., *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).

²⁹ Jurij Meden, *Scratches and Glitches: Observations on Preserving and Exhibiting Cinema in the Early 21st Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 25.

is a history of scratches, tears, burns, blurry images, delayed changeovers, missing frames, imperfect framings, [and] random speeds.”³⁰

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 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,”³¹ 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.”³² 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).³³

³⁰ Ibid., 25–26.

³¹ Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital*, 3.

³² Ibid., 6–7.

³³ 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).

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.³⁴ 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 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.³⁵ The face of actor Josef Šváb-Malostranský in Fig. 0.5 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. 0.2 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 and 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

³⁴ 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).

³⁵ 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).

should actively search for through active close reading³⁶ 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 film (particularly animation).³⁷ 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 [...]”³⁸ 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.”³⁹ 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 frame⁴⁰ as a battleground where different gestures, traces, temporalities, materialities, and figurations confront each other and participate in the film's meaning.

The Crack-Up

³⁶ 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.

³⁷ 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.

³⁸ Ryan Pierson, *Figure and Force in Animation Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.

³⁹ Schonig, “Cinema's Motion Forms,” 57–58.

⁴⁰ Hannah Frank, *Frame by Frame: A Materialist Aesthetics of Animated Cartoons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

Now that the basic stage for understanding figuration and materiality is set, the challenge lies in conceptualizing the mechanism that brings the disparate spheres together. The relationship between the figurative and material dimensions is anything but automatic. Throughout film history, materiality and technology have predominantly been seen as separate from figuration – as something that must be effaced or, in the case of modernist and avant-garde cinema, as something that must be unmasked – and for a long time theoretical reflections on technology followed suit. Early phenomenological readings of cinema (André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer, Stanley Cavell) tended to describe film technology as a means for seeing the world anew or discovering it as it should be known.⁴¹ Conversely, proponents of classical semiotic film theory of the 1960s and 1970s such as Peter Wollen, Stephen Heath, or, most radically, Peter Gidal criticized the notion of technology as subservient to meaning and championed avant-garde cinema that highlighted the grounding of figuration in technological processes.⁴² In both cases, filmic matter is perceived as representation’s “Other” – whether invisible, enabling us to better see the real world, or all-too-visible, enabling us to see the real world as a false construction.

With the boom of materialist-oriented approaches at the turn of the 21st century, the relationship between figuration and materiality started to gain more attention, as the renewed interest in found footage and the already mentioned accounts from Paolo Cherchi Usai, Jihoon Kim, and Katherine Groo testify. Still, film-theoretical accounts of found footage usually stress the destructive or distorting effects of material intrusions or temporal decay on representational images and their wider cultural impact. For example, the articles on found footage in the influential edited volume *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' Through The Arts* (2013) place an emphasis on the disruptive quality of filmic matter in figurative images – on its potential to “undermine the grammar and syntax of the films” or reveal latent meanings and repressed traumas.⁴³ Such interpretations again tend to emphasize

⁴¹ André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 9–16; Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971); Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁴² Peter Wollen, “Ontology and Materialism in Film,” in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 189–207; Stephen Heath, “Repetition Time: Notes around Structural/Materialist Film,” *Wide Angle* 2, no. 3 (1978), 4–11; Peter Gidal, *Materialist Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014). For an overview of these debates, see D. N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁴³ Nicholas Chare and Liz Watkins, “The Matter of Film: Decasia and Lyrical Nitrate,” in *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' Through the Arts*, eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 75–87; Dirk de Bruyn, “Recovering the Hidden Through Found-Footage Films,” in *Carnal*

the otherness of materiality in relation to traditional figuration – which is to an extent reasonable – but they often do so at the expense of capturing the minute interchanges between the two spheres and their concrete forms. If we want to understand this complicated relationship in both its destructive and productive contours, it is in order to dedicate more attention to moments such as the scene in Bill Morrison’s film *Decasia: The State of Decay* (2002) where a boxer is seen fighting against an amorphous material blob (once presumably the image of a punching ball) that threatens to swallow him.⁴⁴

Even to a larger extent than the boxer-blob fight, which was at least partially set by the appropriating artist, the weird figures in *Digital Kříženecký* do not gain and maintain shape within a distinctive interval by themselves. 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. Returning to the opening anecdote, I propose to call this mechanism “the crack-up.” Fitzgerald’s narrative of a personal crisis also involves a broader reflection of the “premature” crack-up as something that has been present all along: “*Of course* all life is a process of breaking down...”⁴⁵ Thirty years later, this sentence captured the interest of Gilles Deleuze, who developed it into a concept in two “series” of *The Logic of Sense* (1968): “Porcelain and Volcano” and “Zola and the Crack-Up.”⁴⁶ In the crack-up (*fêlure* in French), Deleuze 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.”⁴⁷

Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' Through the Arts, eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 89–104.

⁴⁴ Bernd Herzogenrath, “Decasia. The Matter | Image: Film is also a Thing,” in *The Films of Bill Morrison: Aesthetics of the Archive*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 86.

⁴⁵ Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up.”

⁴⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), 154–161; 321–333.

⁴⁷ Deleuze, “Zola and the Crack-Up,” in *The Logic of Sense* (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), 332.

It is precisely this crack-up, as I strive to argue, that constitutes the schizophrenic relationship between figuration and materiality in Digital Kříženecký, and found footage and archival film in general. One may object that the comical or disturbing assemblages depicted in Figs. 0.1–0.5 are quite far removed from the alcoholics, neurotics, and train wrecks from Zola’s and Fitzgerald’s novels, or that the concept is too vague to account for such specific formal and technological phenomena. By extension, one could also ask, “why a Deleuzian crack-up?” when we can find similar yet often more elaborate concepts of speculatively and aesthetically generative negativity elsewhere. For instance, Dieter Mersch and his “media paradoxes” could account for encounters between ontologically distinct spheres of the image that show the mediality of the medium in its negativity. The paradoxes complete a “movement of postponement and confusion” that creates “traces and furrows and thereby leaves behind delineations which expose the specific mechanisms and operations of medial processes and their evident nature.”⁴⁸ Ruptures such as “interventions, disturbances, obstacles, the reversal of structures, the extreme slowing or acceleration of time, the doubling up of or iteration of signs, amplification exploited to obscenity and much more” “induce strategies of difference which cannot be listed individually, only discovered anew.”⁴⁹ If we opted for a concept that stressed connection rather than disruption, then we could return to affect theory and its many intervals, interstices, and in-betweens. In my previous research, I defined the “affective interval” as a “temporal gap in which the emotional expression emerges or disappears, multiplies or dissolves, exceeds or loses its meaning to generate affective surplus.”⁵⁰ Should we apply the affective interval to the relationship between the figurative and the material, its role would be to capture the specific figures in the process of becoming, precisely between the no longer and the not yet.

Still, I argue that the crack-up offers something different than these notions – especially if we (mis)understand the term beyond its strictly Deleuzian designation and more as a metaphor. 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

⁴⁸ Dieter Mersch, “Tertium datur. Introduction to a Negative Media Theory,” *Matrizes* 7, no. 1 (2013), 218.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁵⁰ Anger, “(Un)Frozen expressions,” 27.

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.

By being explicitly linked to weird shapes engraved into the matter of film, the crack-up gains the chance to be inscribed right where it belongs – on the surface of things, or, more specifically, into the depth of the surface. According to Deleuze, the crack-up is “neither internal nor external,” but “rather at the frontier” – “imperceptible, incorporeal, and ideational.”⁵¹ When it explodes on the screen, we see technological elements deforming the image content and figurative elements pulling towards abstraction, but the crack-up itself remains virtual – operating at the edge of both dimensions and regulating their interaction to make way for weird shapes to unfold. When the lightning streak hits the horses, the material does not overshadow the figurative (nor vice versa). What counts is their “interference and interfacing,”⁵² the short-lived yet generative interaction of new and surprising figures and shapes beyond the figurative-material scission. Crucially, though – and this might be a general contribution to Deleuzian philosophy – the crack-up should not be reducible to the affirmative language of becoming, lines of flight, and the production of the new that is usually associated with Deleuze.⁵³ After all, the void that the crack-up opens entails an imminent risk of “the shattering and bursting of the end,”⁵⁴ of the figurative image falling into the depths of filmic matter. Facing (though not fetishizing) the potential horror of the crack-up presents us with a chance to find the darker, more “dangerous” Deleuze that certain philosophers have recently searched for.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Deleuze, *Porcelain and Volcano*, 155.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ The criticism of this affirmative bias of Deleuzian philosophy is most poignantly formulated here: Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), esp. 51–79.

⁵⁴ Deleuze, *Porcelain and Volcano*, 155.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy, vol. 1* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011); Andrew Culp, *Dark Deleuze* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

The crack-up thus forms the conceptual groundwork for all the examinations of strange encounters between figuration and materiality to follow. Sometimes support is provided by related concepts that help define the specific contours and stages of the crack-up. For example, Chapter 1 utilizes Eugene Thacker's concept of "world-without-us" to account for the instance when the crowd is in danger of being swallowed by the inert filmic matter, and Chapter 3 employs Gilbert Simondon's notion of "transduction" to describe the moment of the trembling bridge when the figurative and material dimensions appear to respond to each other and reach an equilibrium of sorts. Ultimately, though, the crack-up pervades throughout the text as a "gift"⁵⁶ from philosophy – one that provides an overarching metaphor for the paradoxical encounters between figurative and material elements yet always gives way to describe and analyze what makes the figures in Digital Kříženecký, found footage, and archival films genuinely unique.

The Life Cycle of the Crack-Up

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.

⁵⁶ "If a philosophical reading returns to film or literary studies some fact or insight regarding the nature or history of the medium and its meanings and effects, it is in the form of a gift." D. N. Rodowick, *What Philosophy Wants from Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 45.

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

The first chapter – “Keep That Image Burning: Grand Consecration, Color Veil, and the Cinema That Never Stops Ending” – deals with *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge* (Slavnostní vysvěcení mostu císaře Františka I., 1901), probably the most distorted film from the digitized oeuvre. The people walking on the bridge are covered by a rippling color veil, progressing from yellow to orange to red. The yellowish-orange color layer of uncertain origin, typical for early Lumière nitrate prints, serves as a filter that distributes the range of material elements – analog and digital, intrinsic and extrinsic, human- and non-human-shaped – across the image, and consequently determines what can or cannot be seen and recognized of its content. This chapter investigates how the crack-up at its rawest and most dangerous can move us to rethink the death of cinema as an aesthetic potentiality, with the film’s distributed materiality demonstrating how many possible deaths can be staged on a single image plane.

The second chapter – “Do Archivists Dream of Electric Horses?: Spring Races, Static Electricity, and the Quadruple Logic of Indexicality” – takes aim at the film *The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague* (První den jarních dostihů pražských, 1908). Here, tiny white streaks of lightning inconspicuously intervene in the image, sometimes even hitting the horse racers. Unlike many more traditional material traces in old films and photographs (rips, dots, dust), these static marks point back to the original event of shooting the film, to the encounter between the Cinématographe, the film strip passing through the camera, the operator turning the crank, and the filmed figures in their environment. The chapter reassesses the indexicality of film, generally understood as a causal connection between the object of reality and its photographic reproduction, and shows how the crack-up reveals its quadruple logic, torn between figuration and materiality, trace and deixis.

The third chapter – “Trembling Meaning: Opening Ceremony, Camera Instability, and Transduction in Archival Moving Images” – covers the actuality *Opening Ceremony of the*

Čech Bridge (Slavnost otevření nového Čechova mostu, 1908). At one point, the horizontal and vertical trembling of the Cinematograph translates into the trembling of the people on the bridge who are approaching the apparatus with such perfect timing that the figurative and material spheres appear to cooperate towards a common aesthetic goal. Gilbert Simondon's notion of transduction allows us to account for the autonomous distribution of elements between these heterogeneous spheres while maintaining a certain (meta)stability of this distribution within a system. Despite the short-lived equilibrium between the figurative and material elements achieved within the cracked-up moment, the chapter outlines how it can be foregrounded and looped into eternity.

The fourth chapter – “The Milestone That Never Happened: An Assignment in the Mill, the Scratched Kiss, and the Failed Beginning of Czech Cinema” – focuses on the pioneering film of Czech cinema, *An Assignment in the Mill* (Dostaveníčko ve mlýnici, 1898). Immediately after actor Josef Šváb-Malostranský unveils the “Czech Cinematograph” poster, there is a sudden shift to a story of a failed tryst. However, what binds these two events together is a glimpse of perceptual ambiguity – is it two characters in search of a kiss or the scratched canvas of an abstract painting? The interrupted first kiss of Czech cinema opens a window onto the question of what makes us put such faith and nostalgia into the pioneering mo(nu)ments of national cinemas. The vertical scratches that simultaneously connect and disconnect the film's two segments remind us to what extent even the most treasured cinematic firsts are always already riddled with the powers of the false.

The fifth chapter – “Touching the Film Object with Surgical Gloves: Laughter and Tears, Spliced Frames, and the Fragile Malleability of Cinematic Faces” – concerns itself with another iconic film involving Šváb-Malostranský, *Laughter and Tears* (Smích a pláč, 1898). This study of facial expressions in a close-up is meant to reveal the most minute details, yet Šváb's visage is almost never visible in itself but concealed under numerous types of decay and deformation – sometimes even stitched together from various parts like the Frankenstein's monster. Approaching such a fragile entity demands a haptic perspective that questions not only the integrity of the specific film object but also the mastery of the analyzing subject. By discerning the crack-up between two distinct forms of the close-up – a figurative one (the facial shot) and a material one (the splice) – the chapter portrays the cinematic face as a landscape riddled with diverse materialities and autonomous processes

and highlights the potentialities that stem from combining the two facial modalities in surprising ways.

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.”⁵⁷ 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).⁵⁸ 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 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.

⁵⁷ 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.

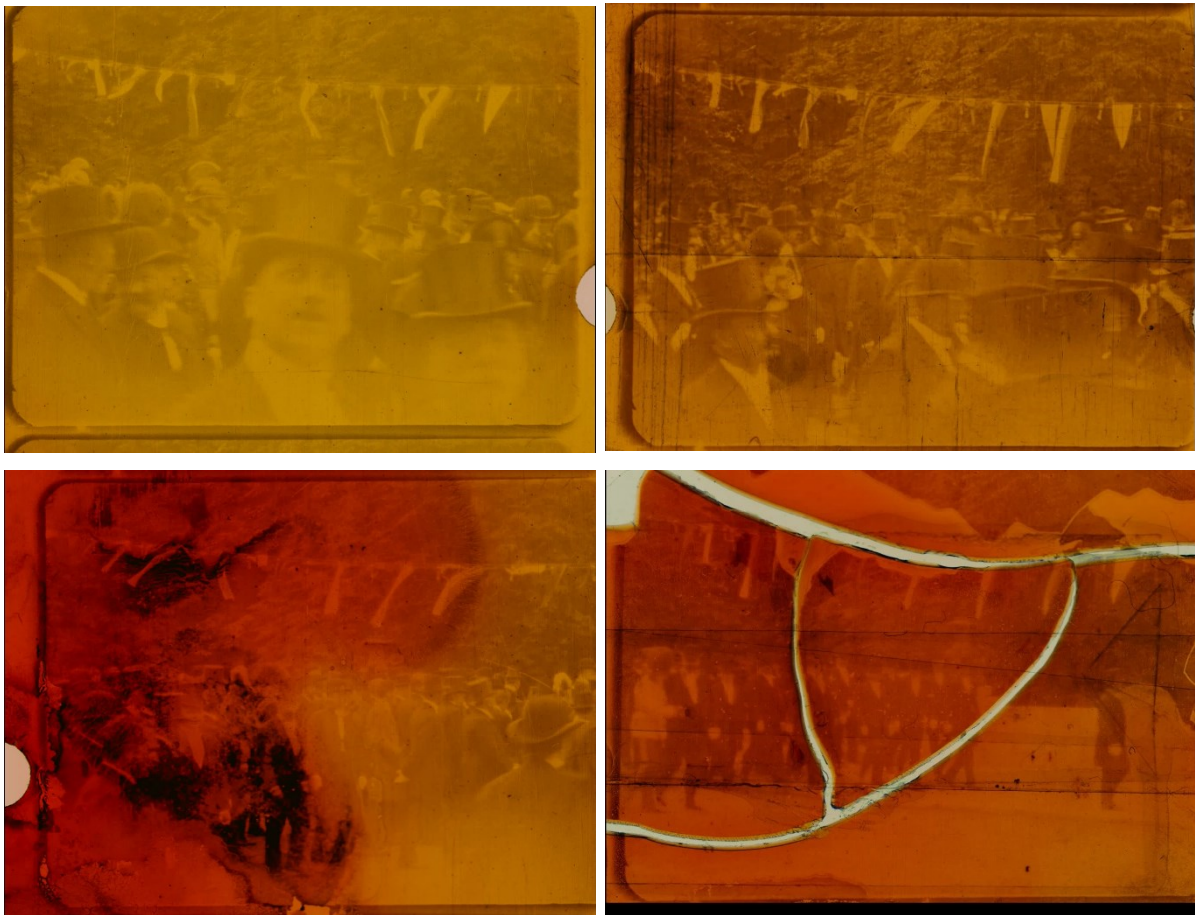
⁵⁸ Bernd Herzogenrath, “Toward a Practical Aesthetics: Thinking With,” in *Practical Aesthetics*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 1–24.

Thus, the final chapter – “Shaping the Unshapeable?: Videographic Deformation and the First Frames of Czech Cinema” – 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. The essay titled *The First Frames of Czech Cinema* contains the single “first frame” of each piece of digitized original film material (nitrate prints and negatives) assembled into a compilation that shows them in detail as well as part of a larger mosaic. On the one hand, the videographic essay exploits the possibilities of digital technology to shift perspective and bring obscure details to the fore; on the other, it is also a reflection of an early screening practice, when projectionists started the presentation with a still image that gradually evolved into a continuous movement. The chapter brings forth the idea that what we perceive as a sustainable and categorizable unit never coincides with itself and always contains hidden viewpoints and angles that may turn them into something different.

1. Keep That Image Burning

Grand Consecration, Color Veil, and the Cinema That Never Stops Ending

June 14, 1901. Jan Křizenecký shoots the grand consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge. The camera stands on the left side of the bridge and captures the people passing by. Some ignore the apparatus, others try to draw attention to themselves, at least for an instant. This is what the filmmaker, and perhaps also the film's audience, wanted to see in the resulting film. Yet, another actor makes itself visible in its own way. The walking figures are covered by a rippling color veil, progressing from yellow to orange to red. Amidst these two planes, wherein lies the film's aesthetic meaning, if there ever was one?



Figures 1.1–1.4: *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge* (Slavnostní vysvěcení mostu císaře Františka I., 1901, source: nitrate print) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

The 46-seconds-long,⁵⁹ incompletely preserved⁶⁰ actuality *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge* (Slavnostní vysvěcení mostu císaře Františka I., 1901, source: nitrate print) presents one of the most distorted films from Kříženecký's digitized body of work. Despite (or because of) high-resolution digital video, the images still burst with cracks, holes, and burns; some of the frames are missing or incomplete; others hold together only because of splices. Additionally, the edges of the frame are unstable, shifting horizontally and vertically, and the circular perforations follow suit.⁶¹ However, the most distinctive element is the vibrant color layer, which not only blurs the characters and objects represented in the film but also brings the punctured skin of the film to the foreground. The origin of this yellow (or, more precisely, yellowish-orange) layer remains unclear. At first glance, it might seem reminiscent of tinting and toning practices of adding color to black-and-white films.⁶² Nevertheless, the presence of the yellowish-orange shade within all the surviving original nitrate prints from Kříženecký's estate is remarkably consistent, especially given the diversity of colors that were used for tinting and toning during that period, often even within a single print. Furthermore, the shade bears a striking resemblance to many existing (but mostly overlooked) color nitrate prints manufactured by Victor Planchon for the Lumière brothers, spread across film archives in various countries and employed by various filmmakers and operators.⁶³ Nor can the color layer be easily attributed to material degradation, at least not entirely.⁶⁴ Sure, the red stains and spots in many of the frames signify aging and decay, and the proportion between yellow and orange also varies, but the layer persists, always spreading

⁵⁹ This length applies for 24 fps projection speed and includes the newly added opening titles.

⁶⁰ According to Zdeněk Štábla, the film originally consisted of three parts. Zdeněk Štábla, *Český kinematograf Jana Kříženeckého* (Praha: Československý filmový ústav, 1973), 112.

⁶¹ This fluctuation is partly an effect of the digitization process. The perforations at the edges of the film strips were used as reference points for digital stabilization of the image. However, since the software was incompatible with the circular perforations, and also with the numerous mechanical damages, each frame had to be moved manually in the scanner. Hence, maintaining a stable image was not entirely possible. Jeanne Pommeau and Jirí Anger, "The Digitization of Jan Kříženecký's Films," *Illuminace* 31, no. 1 (2019), 105, 107.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 106; see also Jeanne Pommeau, "The Digitisation of Kříženecký's Films [videocommentary]." For tinting, the positive print is immersed into a variety of dye baths, scene by scene. To this end, the print has to be cut into the corresponding fragments and reassembled after the dyeing process. In contrast to tinting, toning is not the simple immersion of a film into a dye bath but involves a chemical reaction converting the silver image. In this reaction, the neutral silver image in the emulsion of the positive film is replaced by one consisting of colored metal compounds. See: Barbara Flueckiger, Eva Hielscher and Nadine Wietlisbach, eds., *Color Mania: The Material of Color in Photography and Film* (Baden: Lars Müllers Publishing, 2019), and the related website Timeline of Historical Film Colors, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://filmcolors.org/>.

⁶³ This fact is mentioned by Laurent Mannoni, who also speaks about the existence of red and blue prints besides the yellow-orange ones. He also criticizes the overlooking of such prints by the archival and scholarly community. Laurent Mannoni, "Les Appareils cinématographiques Lumière," *1895*, no. 82 (2017), 71.

⁶⁴ Eric Loné attributes the yellowish veil to "coloration," referring to "the natural impact on the medium's original colour of the way it was manufactured." Eric Loné, "Lumière," in Harold Brown, *Physical Characteristics of Early Films as Aids to Identification*, ed. Camille Blot-Wellens (Brussels: FIAF, 2020), 165.

over the entire surface of the print.⁶⁵ Even if we bear in mind the (still inevitable) shift between how the colors look on the original print and how they look in the digital file, the yellowish-orange in Kříženecký's films does not exactly recall the sepia tone that we usually encounter in fading nitrate photographs. Thus, the most valid hypothesis to this date is the one currently investigated by Jeanne Pommeau – that the vintage prints from Kříženecký's estate already contained color prior to the printing process.⁶⁶ This hypothesis will, nevertheless, have to be confirmed by chemical research – not only of the film prints from Kříženecký's estate but also of the Lumière prints in general, especially those from the same Lumière-Planchon series as the film strips used by Kříženecký.⁶⁷

Therefore, the color layer is the key factor that intervenes into the material status of Kříženecký's film. Its influence manifests in two main respects. First, if the hypothesis about the presence of a monochromatic layer prior to the printing process were correct, that is, the veil resulted from specific properties of the overlooked family of Lumière color prints of which Jeanne Pommeau speaks, the film's material deformations would be determined primarily by intrinsic features of the film stock and emulsion, and not only by external actors brought by the ravages of time. Second, even if the hypothesis were not correct, the media properties of the digitized film would depend on the uncanny presence of a technological agent – a presence that is so consistent and so intrusive, and at the same time so diffused between different forms of materiality, that it cannot be erased or retouched without creating the film anew.

Nonetheless, the color layer does not warrant our attention solely for its technical aspects. The main issue lies in its impact on the aesthetics of the moving image, or, more specifically, in its influence on the relationship between the figurative content of the image (what is represented

⁶⁵ For a visual demonstration of various stages of nitrate deterioration, see, for example: "Instructions: A Visual Glossary of Six Stages of Nitrate Film Base Deterioration." *Library and Archives Canada*, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/about-us/publications/electronic-books/Pages/visual-glossary-nitrate-deterioration.aspx>.

⁶⁶ Jeanne Pommeau is currently working on a PhD dissertation on this topic. See, for example: Jeanne Pommeau, "Le mystère des couleurs des pellicules du Cinématographe Lumière," Conference paper presented at Domitor 2020, November 17, 2020, accessed July 31, 2021. <https://domitor2020.org/en-ca/le-mystere-des-couleurs-des-pellicules-du-cinematographe-lumiere/>. Other than that, it is not known whether this particular issue has ever been seriously investigated.

⁶⁷ The importance of conducting chemical research of Lumière nitrate prints is also highlighted by Benoît Turquety. Benoît Turquety, "Why Additive? Problems of Color and Epistemological Networks in Early (Film) Technology," in *The Colour Fantastic: Chromatic Worlds of Silent Cinema*, Giovanna Fossati et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 117–118. See also: Benoît Turquety, "Not Corrected or Otherwise Manipulated: Digitizing the Films of Jan Kříženecký," *Illuminace* 32, no. 4 (2020), 124–130.

in the scene and how it is formally composed) and its material-technological underpinnings. The convoluted color veil that instantly arises and never disappears creates a membrane between the figures walking on the bridge and, paradoxically, also any other intrusions of the material world, be it the properties of the Lumière film stock or various traces of decay (including the decay of the color veil itself). This membrane constitutes a gap between the filmed event and us, shifting our attention to the interplay between technological elements of various origins on the surface while still maintaining our curiosity about what is going on “underneath.” It may be described as a filter that determines what can or cannot be seen and recognized of the figurative space, and the extent to which the intrusion of diverse material actors extends the range of figurative processes. In other words, the color veil highlights the dependence of figuration on the material carrier, as well as the aesthetic potentialities that emerge when the discernible figures and technological components intertwine.

In *Grand Consecration*, the crack-up between figuration and materiality embodied by the color veil arises in its rawest, most abstract, most volatile form – it is not possible to determine whether the destructive impulses will not outweigh any struggle to represent. Owing to the seriousness of the deformations, any provisional balance between the two dimensions skews towards the material-technological ground. Throughout the film, we can see many frames that are either torn apart or covered by red stains to such an extent that the figurative content (almost) disappears. However, the crack-up is not purely destructive – not only does the folding of the color veil stage a distinct form of figuration on its own, but it also draws attention to the mutual entanglement of actors that become involved in the figurative processes. The aesthetic effect of the film depends equally on traces of its analog past and its digitization in 4K, on signs of degradation as much as on elements shaped by the film’s production process, on forces that spell inevitable destruction of the film as well as potentialities that point towards new aesthetic formation. Thus, the crack-up in all its ambiguities presents an invisible glue that, by means of initial separation, shows the figurative and material elements as necessarily tied to each other.

For these reasons, any examination of *Grand Consecration*’s aesthetic function cannot do without addressing its material and media properties. Excursions into theoretical accounts of filmic matter and its ever-changing ontology (from André Bazin and his correlation between materiality and indexicality to contemporary concerns about the entanglement of analog and digital, human and non-human, living and non-living entities) and archival research on film

technology (especially that which focuses on the issues of digital preservation and restoration) are necessary to assess the role of the color veil in the distribution of figurative and material elements across the moving image. And, conversely, the materialist-inclined approaches need to acknowledge that various deformations of filmic matter have their own figurative merit, whether intentional or unintentional – this is why the found footage phenomenon, with its aesthetic possibilities and affective qualities, also becomes a valuable factor in the present discussion.

Thus, face to face with archival artifacts whose matter is distributed between analog and digital elements, as well as deformations of diverse origins, the following questions arise: What do such extremely distorted films as *Grand Consecration* bring to the debates about the ontology of the inevitably transforming moving image and the often presumed death of cinema? How does this ontological instability affect the fragile relationship between figuration and materiality, and, consequently, our understanding of this tension within archival footage and its artistic uses, for example, in experimental found footage films? And specifically, in which ways can the (dis)figurative potential of the color veil be unleashed, whether for aesthetic or scholarly ends? *Grand Consecration* and its specific material-technological qualities serve to concretize these issues in a miniature yet condensed manner. Even the slightest detail surfacing within the digitized frame must be made to speak about the most speculative problems that contemporary film and media theory is facing.

1.1. Mummy Complex and the Death Drive of Cinema

As advertised, *Grand Consecration* presents one of the most severe cases of material deformation within Kříženecký's digitized oeuvre. As far as concealment of the figurative content goes, none of the digitized materials reach quite the same level, yet the preserved nitrate prints – particularly *Midsummer Pilgrimage in a Czechoslovak Village* (Svatojanská pouť v československé vesnici; 1898, source: nitrate print), *An Assignment in the Mill* (Dostaveníčko ve mlýnici; 1898, source: nitrate print), or the fragment *Coach Transport* (Kočárová doprava; 1898, source: nitrate print) – more or less share with *Grand Consecration* the tension between the discernible fictional world, the fluctuating color veil, and various signs of mechanical damage, image instability, and temporal ruination. At the same time,

these prints were practically invisible for a hundred years;⁶⁸ when the films appeared in compilations, documentaries about the history of Czech cinema, the source materials were later generation duplicate prints. From one point of view, this obscurity seems logical – due to the non-standard single pair of round perforations,⁶⁹ the original prints are no longer screenable, the decaying nitrate base is at permanent risk of burning, and the films’ pioneering status makes them treasured artifacts that need to be preserved for future generations. On top of that, the yellowish-orange layer might have been considered undesirable for its tendency to occlude what is happening in the image, as well as colliding with the ingrained (albeit nowadays firmly disproved) idea that early films were black-and-white. However, as the case of *Grand Consecration* demonstrates quite clearly, a vintage nitrate print from the early 1900s and a later generation dupe make for altogether different aesthetic meanings and effects. If we compare the dance of colors in the digitized vintage print with indistinct black stains in, for example, Bohumil Veselý’s compilation *Jan Kříženecký* (1968),⁷⁰ taking into account alterations caused by the ravages of time and digital compression, we see completely different films. The color veil became a full-fledged aesthetic feature and simultaneously a materialized metaphor for the ontological deformation lying at the heart of film.

The decision not to efface any signs of filmic physicality and mortality, even with the most high-end technology at hand, can be better understood within the “death of cinema” debates that have, for the last roughly thirty years, tried to make sense out of the changing materiality of film. Spelling the end of cinema has always been a popular sport among all professions involved in film, particularly in times of crisis or technological change. André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion counted as many as eight deaths of cinema since its advent⁷¹ (Gaudreault and Marion 2015) – from Antoine Lumière’s denouncement of his sons’ invention as one “with no

⁶⁸ First duplicate prints were made in the second half of the 1920s, when Karel Smrž and Ludovít Honty (with the support of the Czechoslovak Society for Scientific Cinematography) transferred the original Lumière perforated film stock (with 1 round perforation on each side of a film frame) onto classic Edison perforated film stock (with 4 “angular” perforations on each side of a frame). See a 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, and also Jan Trnka, *The Czech Film Archive 1943–1993: Institutional Development and Problems of Practice* (Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2018), 85.

⁶⁹ The films were shot on film stock from the Lumière brothers with specific perforation – one round sprocket hole on each side of the film frame, instead of the now standard four angular perforations: Pommeau and Anger, “The Digitization of Jan Kříženecký’s Films,” 105.

⁷⁰ “Jan Kříženecký,” YouTube, 2013, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rk2OrOXEmnM>.

⁷¹ André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

future”⁷² to the digital crisis – the shutdown of cinemas due to Coronavirus might be number nine.⁷³ Thus far, the last wave came in the 1990s with the advent of digital technology and the fears about analog film becoming obsolescent, and, in a less apocalyptic fashion, it is still present in today’s thinking, including in archival, scholarly, and artistic circles.⁷⁴ The death of cinema debate has multiple levels, related to issues such as verisimilitude (indexical linkage to reality vs. computer-generated imagery), spectatorship (collective “going to the cinema” vs. individual viewing practices throughout digital platforms), production (physical relation to film vs. “manipulation” through mediating software), or temporality (photochemical image as indicative of the past vs. electronic images that collapse temporal differences into real-time instantaneity).⁷⁵ One factor that brought concerns of archivists, scholars, and artists together is, to quote Jihoon Kim, the “loss of film’s celluloid-based materiality and its subsequent erosion of the value of the filmic image as causally linked to the passage of time in reality.”⁷⁶ Although this essentialist view of the marriage between materiality and indexicality as a basis of the analog film has often been problematized,⁷⁷ it served its role in redrawing attention to the ontology of film. Considering all the transformations and redefinitions of the film

⁷² I am referring to his famous statement: “Cinema is an invention with no future.” He allegedly said it when Georges Méliés, who was present at the Grand Café screening on December 28, 1895, asked him to sell him the Cinématographe patent. See Maurice Bessy and Lo Duca, *Louis Lumière inventeur* (Paris: Éditions Prisma, 1948), 49.

⁷³ See, for example: Kong Rithdee, Corona and the death of cinema (again). *Bangkok Post*, March 30, 2020, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/social-and-lifestyle/1889185/corona-and-the-death-of-cinema-again->.

⁷⁴ For the debate on the death of cinema in the archival circles, see, for example: Gian Luca Farinelli and Nicola Mazzanti, eds., *Il Cinema ritrovato: Teoria e metodologia del restauro cinematografico* (Bologna: Grafis, 1994); Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark Age* (London: BFI, 2001); Roger Smither, ed., *This Film Is Dangerous: A Celebration of Nitrate Film* (London: FIAF, 2002). Some of the most influential contributions to the respective debate in film theory and history are these texts: Anne Friedberg, “The End of Cinema: Multimedia and Technological Change,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 438–452; 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); Barbara Flueckiger, “Material properties of historical film in the digital age,” *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies* 1, no. 2 (2012), 135–153; Richard Grusin and Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece, eds., *Ends of Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020). From the variety of artists thematizing the role of analog film in the digital age, we could name Bill Morrison, Tacita Dean, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, or DJ Spooky. For an examination of the aesthetic aspects of the return to analog, see, for example: Katherine Groo and Paul Flaig, “Historicity begins with decay and ends with the pretense of immortality: An Interview with Paolo Cherchi Usai,” in *New Silent Cinema*, eds. Katherine Groo and Paul Flaig (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 53–62; Scott Mackenzie and Janine Marchessault, eds., *Process Cinema: Handmade Film in the Digital Age* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019); Kim Knowles, *Experimental Film and Photochemical Practices* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

⁷⁵ For a general overview, see Jihoon Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital: Hybrid Moving Images in the Post-Media Age* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 20–28.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷⁷ See, for example: Tom Gunning, “Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality,” *Differences* 18, no. 1 (2007), 29–52; Berys Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Rachel Schaff, “The Photochemical Conditions of the Frame,” *Cinéma & Cie* 16, no. 26–27 (2016), 55–64.

medium, did any specific features persist? If yes, what can we do with their (seemingly inevitable) demise? What shall we do to preserve at least remnants of these unique qualities? And how do we come to terms with the loss of those that cannot be saved?

Once again, a return to André Bazin, especially to his essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945), is necessary. Bazin describes how all plastic arts share a fundamental motivation of “embalming” the dead, preserving corporeal bodies from the ravages of time. The “mummy complex” depends on “a defense against the passage of time,” “for death is but the victory of time.”⁷⁸ The specificity of photography, compared to sculpture and painting, lies in its objectivity: “For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man.”⁷⁹ Photography, thus, “enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction,” with the resulting image equaling “the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it.”⁸⁰ Bazin’s ontology of film is not materialist per se – his focus on the material properties of film is governed by the belief in the mummy complex, which is essentially psychological and subjective.⁸¹ Marxist-oriented film theory of the 1960s and 1970s even criticized Bazin’s conception for being idealist – for example, Peter Wollen argued that Bazin saw the material processes of photographic registration as mere vehicles of transcendent meaning, and thus “transferred the burden of meaning outside the cinema, to the non-cinematic codes.”⁸² Nevertheless, Bazin’s grounding of filmic ontology in the photochemical process, indexically tied to the “reality” shot by the camera and preserved on the celluloid base to fight off our fear of death and decay, is something to which the materialist-oriented theories of film explicitly or intuitively keep returning.

⁷⁸ André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 9.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸¹ See especially: Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 3–42.

⁸² Peter Wollen, “Ontology and Materialism in Film,” in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 206. For a general overview of semiotic-materialist criticism of Bazin, see: D. N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 147–179.

Where would be the place of films such as Kříženecký's *Grand Consecration* in this ontology? Of particular interest is this quote, related to the material quality of photography: "No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model."⁸³ A case in point for Bazin are the old family albums, whose "grey or sepia shadows, phantomlike and almost indecipherable, are no longer traditional family portraits but rather the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration, freed from their destiny."⁸⁴ The fact that the color veil significantly obscures the reality of the depicted event, or, more precisely, that it puts the represented figures on one plane with the endlessly varying marks of deterioration (from torn sprocket holes to rotting red stains) would not make the film any less authentic or indexical. Maybe the reverse is true – Blandine Joret, referring to the "Ontology" essay and also to a later article on Thor Heyerdahl's expedition documentary *Kon-Tiki* (1950),⁸⁵ shows how "extremely poor quality," "uninviting shooting conditions," or "huge gaps" in the films may paradoxically work as proofs of authenticity – provided that they relate to the original circumstances of filming.⁸⁶ The presence of the color layer may have been undesired by Kříženecký and, owing to its lack of recognizable content, may have led to the film being accused of lacking in documentary value; nevertheless, it is also an indexical sign that harkens back to the conditions that shaped the film's existence in the first place. In a way, it can be seen as a more radical example than anything Bazin ever came up with. Unlike the family photographs, the color veil, by means of unmasking the multiplicity of deformations on its surface, threatens to disfigure even the last straws of reality that was once meant to be captured. Furthermore, there is a strong possibility that, unlike the sepia tone, the yellowish-orange layer is not just a trace of decay but an integral feature of the material.

A reflection of films that are defined by their material dimension to such an extent demands to inject Bazinian ontology with an archival impulse. Bazin's mummy complex, especially in its darker contours, resonates with the perspective of film archivist and curator Paolo Cherchi

⁸³ Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 14.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ André Bazin, "Le Kon-Tiki ou grandeur et servitudes du reportage filmé," *France Observateur*, April 30, 1952, 23–24. See also: André Bazin, "Cinema and Exploration," in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 154–163.

⁸⁶ Blandine Joret, *Studying Film with André Bazin* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 49–50.

Usai, one of the pioneers of the “death of cinema” debate in the archival circles,⁸⁷ whose approach continues to inspire creative policies and solutions in film preservation and restoration (including those applied by the National Film Archive in Prague),⁸⁸ as well as new approaches to film history.⁸⁹ In his most well-known book, aptly named *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark Age* (2001), he directly states that “cinema is the art of moving image destruction.”⁹⁰ From the moment it is produced, the film begins its decomposition process. Each run of a film print through a projector signals mechanical damage; the chemical substrate is in a permanent risk of decay, if not immolation (in the case of nitrate); and even the best storage conditions do not save the image carrier from a host of cancerous non-human agents such as bacteria and fungi.⁹¹ As if the mummy’s defense against the passage of time were predestined to fail – due to the fragile bindings of its body, it is already a thing that is in a state of decay. In this situation, for Cherchi Usai, “the ultimate goal of film history is an account of its own disappearance, or its transformation into another entity.”⁹²

Among other things, Cherchi Usai’s notions teach us about the film’s entwinement in the material universe. First and foremost, Cherchi Usai’s apocalyptic vision demonstrates one key aspect: the death of cinema is not reducible to the digital turn, nor even to the other seven deaths mentioned by Gaudreault and Marion – it constitutes an immanent principle. The correlation of materiality and indexicality introduced by Bazin makes sense only within this “will-to-death,” the fact that as soon as film is not busy being born, it starts being busy dying. If we take Bazin’s mummy complex seriously, we may ask, along with Bernd Herzogenrath, what happens if “the corruption and entropy [...] also eat at the mummy’s bandages”⁹³ as in many films of Jan Kříženecký? Sepia-toned family albums may preserve traces of indexical presence, but still: are they not a paltry thing in comparison with the punctured surface of

⁸⁷ Cherchi Usai has been publishing texts on this topic since the 1980s, both in English and Italian. For his early views on the materiality of (especially silent) cinema, see Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Una passione infiammabile* (Turin: UTET, 1991).

⁸⁸ The discourse on film preservation and reservation in the Czech archival and scholarly scene is significantly influenced by Usai, at least ever since Anna Batistová brought his thoughts to the Czech audience. See, for example: Anna Batistová, “Poezie destrukce: Typologie, periodizace a reflexe destrukce filmových pohyblivých obrazů,” *Illuminace* 17, no. 3 (2005), 27–46.

⁸⁹ See, for example, the recent works of Katherine Groo. Katherine Groo, *Bad Film Histories: Ethnography and the Early Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); Katherine Groo, “Let It Burn: Film Historiography in Flames,” *Discourse* 41, no. 1 (2019), 3–36.

⁹⁰ Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema*, 6.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 89.

⁹³ Bernd Herzogenrath, “Aesthetics of the Archive: An Introduction,” in *The Films of Bill Morrison: Aesthetics of the Archive*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 16.

Grand Consecration? Are the signs of time that passed between the film's birth and the present moment really on the same level as the color veil that more than possibly participated in the film's very origin, "by virtue of the very process of its becoming"?⁹⁴ If such an image still shares "the being of the model of which it is the reproduction,"⁹⁵ does the opaque color veil signal that the reality captured on film has been doomed right from the start? Faced with such extreme artifacts, the "materiality-indexicality" alliance needs to be reconceived (and radicalized) with regards to the death drive of (not only) filmic matter and its transgression of the thin line that separates the figurative universe from annihilation.

1.2. Slow Decay or Vibrant Creation?

Two notions in Cherchi Usai's theory, when confronted with the digitization of Kříženecký's films and their specific forms of the crack-up between figuration and materiality, need to be adjusted. First, Cherchi Usai's emphasis on materiality is inseparable from its subjection to historical decay. On the one hand, moving images are ontologically auto-destructive, on the other, the destruction takes place under the condition that they have already been produced and started aging. To quote Cherchi Usai, "once it has been projected, the film [...] is subject to the physical decay of its images and the memory of perfection lost,"⁹⁶ as if the process of the film's coming into being (manufacturing, shooting, processing) happened in a vacuum. The existence of a moving image "as it goes through the process of being created" is played down as "hypothetical."⁹⁷ The primacy of degradation would imply that all forms of material distortion are ontologically homogeneous regardless of their origin – not that their differences are not recognized or taken into account during preservation, but, philosophically, they are understood as subject to the same immanent principle of slow death. In this sense, films that contain elements that are inseparable from the film's production process would be no different from "ordinary" aging films with dots, scratches, and dust. The only thing that escapes this fate is the "Model Image," "the summation of all the optical illusions presented [...] in such a way that each viewer can perceive them in their totality," or, to put it more simply, a hypothetical image that would be immune to decay and history.⁹⁸ It is not entirely clear where the color veil in *Grand Consecration* would fit into this story, as it does not necessarily come

⁹⁴ Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 14.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema*, 39.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 40–43.

out of deterioration, nor does it qualify as a feature of the Model Image (more like a thing that prevents us from seeing the figures represented in the film in bright contours). In this particular case, the crack-up is not something that would have to wait for damages to be indicted upon the finished film – the veil is engraved in the figurative content and the material carrier to such an extent that the idea of the film as ever having existed without the veil becomes less and less tenable.

Second, although Cherchi Usai links the destruction of moving images to their attachment to the material world, his insistence on medium specificity – even refusing to call electronic moving images cinema⁹⁹ – narrows the scope of his radical argument. Not that his viewpoint is necessarily nostalgic – although his thoughts were generally interpreted as a plea for saving analog cinema, or at least coming to terms with its loss and decay, the death impulse he talks about affects all matter, not just analog nor even cinema. Moreover, the book came out when massive digitization of archival films was only slowly beginning, and Cherchi Usai certainly paid more nuanced attention to it later.¹⁰⁰ Yet, he remains to see digitization of analog films as little more than a necessary evil or a production of “facsimiles.”¹⁰¹ He has many valid arguments to support these claims – for example, that digitization cannot reproduce material properties of the photochemical image nor its presentation through a mechanical apparatus in a theatrical setting, and also that it does not involve a long-term plan for preservation, as the digital images are anything but immune to degradation. It is particularly his emphasis on the irreversibility of decay in both analog and digital images, as well as his criticism of the idea of digital restoration,¹⁰² that resonate with the decision of the National Film Archive not to refer to the Kříženecký project as digital restoration. Still, Cherchi Usai’s essentialism makes it hard to account for various hybridized forms of moving images to which the digitization of analog cinema gave birth – be it through pure conversion, circulation in the online space, or artistic appropriation. If we take materials such as *Grand Consecration* and other Kříženecký’s films that are digitally transcoded yet visibly marked by ontological

⁹⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰⁰ Paolo Cherchi Usai, “The Digital Future of Pre-digital Film Collections,” *Journal of Film Preservation*, no. 88 (2013), 9–16; Groo and Flaig, “Historicity begins with decay and ends with the pretense of immortality: An Interview with Paolo Cherchi Usai.”; Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: A Guide to Study, Research and Curatorship* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 6–20.

¹⁰¹ Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema*, 7–8.

¹⁰² “Turning silver grains into pixels is not right or wrong per se; the real problem with digital restoration is its false message that moving images have no history, its delusion of eternity.” Paolo Cherchi Usai, “The Lindgren Manifesto: The Film Curator of the Future,” in *Work/s in Progress: Digital Film Restoration Within Archives*, eds. Kerstin Parth, Oliver Hanley and Thomas Ballhausen (Vienna: SYNEMA, 2013), 28–29.

deformations of the nitrate prints or negatives (such as the color veil), the complex dialectic between their crisp imagery and the pervasive deterioration of various order would most likely be shrugged off as a (however useful) simulation. Furthermore, their death would be singular, without any hope of distinguishing analog and digital deformation (as the former no longer exists in digitized films) or creatively reworking one through the other. If we want to study the digitized materials for what they are, and not for the untouchable and unscreenable originals, we need to consider the plurality of elements contained within them – analog and digital, intrinsic to its production process or imposed by decay, steering towards annihilation or endlessly renewing themselves.

With these actualizations, Cherchi Usai's vision of the death of cinema may serve to open the filmic matter towards different forms of materiality, with their own modes of dying, and, consequently, with their own modes of shaping the crack-up between figuration and materiality. While from Cherchi Usai's viewpoint, films are allowed, paraphrasing Reza Negarestani, to die only in certain ways,¹⁰³ inherent to decay and their analog condition, re-discovering the inherent heterogeneity of filmic matter bears the potential to widen the scope of its death(s). The color veil in *Grand Consecration* enables us to see a variety of deaths – 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 – each of which contributes to the blurring of the film's material character, as well as to its figurative and aesthetic potentialities.

The distribution of media elements that are alien to each other within a single domain demands an approach that would entail the multiplicity of non-identical materialities yet would not result in some abstract, non-differentiated plenitude. For this purpose, Jihoon Kim's theory of "hybrid moving images" mentioned in the Introduction is a useful bridge. His vision of an "array of impure image forms characterized by the interrelation of the material, technical, and aesthetic components of existing moving image media"¹⁰⁴ enables us to

¹⁰³ See Negarestani's critique of "necrocracy," a system which determines the possibilities and limits of death, and therefore negates its emancipatory potential: Reza Negarestani, "Drafting the Inhuman: Conjectures on Capitalism and Organic Necrocracy," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 182–201.

¹⁰⁴ Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital*, 3.

conceptualize hybridized forms of analog and digital images within a single work – in the sense that this interaction serves as an end in itself. Kim’s conception, while not entirely new,¹⁰⁵ 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.”¹⁰⁶ Rather than being satisfied with the affirmation of diverse elements mixing and mingling together, we should acknowledge that hybrid moving images do not necessarily erase conventions associated with either photochemical or digital practices but highlight their relational character. Thus, hybrid moving images accentuate that any notion of medium specificity can be identified only in comparison, by means of how the figurative and material components of other mediums are adopted and what new properties are added to them in the resulting image.¹⁰⁷

Even though Kim focuses primarily on contemporary media art – from video art through found footage to multi-channel installations – his perspective proves handy for the digitized films of Jan Kříženecký as well. Nevertheless, the hybridity of Kříženecký’s works does not manifest in the same way it does in some other types of digitized analog works. While we can argue that formerly analog films that are “restored” through digital retouching and stabilization are technically hybrid, many of the specificities associated with their analog condition (grain of the image, camera trembling, perforations, marks of static electricity, and others) may become suppressed or even invisible. Conversely, the visibility of analog deformation in materials that are “only digitized” depends significantly on the level of compression. As Katherine Groo reminds us, many digitized archival films circulating on the Internet make analog (resulting from the decaying print) and digital (resulting from compression) degradation overlap, at least for a non-professional audience. Using an example of ethnographic cinema from the collections of the EYE Film Institute Netherlands, she mentions that “the processes of digitization and compression contribute yet another layer of visual noise to a collection of already badly damaged films.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, we could say that these artifacts are still hybrid, but too blurry with regards to the specificity of individual properties.

¹⁰⁵ Ontological hybridity of contemporary moving images is accented, for example, by Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*; Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Iain Macdonald, *Hybrid Practices in Moving Image Design: Methods of Heritage and Digital Production in Motion Graphics* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2016); Giovanna Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*. Third Revised Edition (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018). Marion

¹⁰⁶ Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital*, 6–7.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰⁸ Groo, *Bad Film Histories*, 256.

Kříženecký's films, especially *Grand Consecration*, differ in two subtle but key respects. First, due to scanning in 4K resolution, the level of compression and digital noise is much lower. While a certain degree of loss obviously remains, as well as the tendency of all matter towards degradation, the formerly analog deformations become more visible. Simultaneously, the digital code turns out to be more of a general framework that simulates their specific appearance. The digitized color veil may only approximate its nitrate model, but the high-resolution digital image ensures that the analog features can be seen as structuring elements of the work, not as an indistinct mass of stains. Second, every single element that appears on the colored surface can be extracted and put under individual scrutiny in the video-editing software, thereby allowing for the examination of differences and connections between grain and pixel but also nuances between deformations intrinsic to the material and deformations arising from the ravages of time or external intervention. As this coexistence and interrelation of different analog and digital, intrinsic and extrinsic, human- and non-human-induced features of the moving image, as well as transformations of one type of elements through those of the other, inevitably translates into the figurative universe of the films, it demands seeing Digital Kříženecký in the context of hybrid moving images that play with such intrusion on purpose.

Contemporary practices of appropriating archival or found footage constitute a battlefield where the clashes between diverse material elements and images that once meant something different are intentionally put on display.¹⁰⁹ Despite its focus on experimental rather than archival appropriation, what Kim terms “transitional found footage practices” allows us to grasp the role of hybrid materiality in shaping the figurative aspects of Digital Kříženecký. Of interest are particularly films that work with early cinema and old nitrate prints and/or those that address the death of cinema issue. For example, Bill Morrison's film *Decasia: The State of Decay* (2002) may offer what Kříženecký as of yet lacks – an appropriation that would not let the material disfiguration go that far away from meaning, that would follow the folds of the crack-up in *Grand Consecration* and extend it to provoke new insight. And conversely, the encounter may show that even such canonical found footage artworks do not result primarily from artistic genius or traces of passing time – each *Decasia* needs a raw, autonomously

¹⁰⁹ Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital*, 145–195. Kim's notion of found footage's transitionality was preceded by Canadian filmmaker Malcolm Le Grice, who perceived found footage as the ideal bridge between analog and digital technologies. Malcolm Le Grice, *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age* (London: BFI, 2001), 312.

creative piece of archival footage like *Grand Consecration* to establish itself in the first place. Seeing *Grand Consecration* through *Decasia* and vice versa allow us to perceive the ontological death of cinema as mutually involved with the aesthetics of the moving image.

1.3. *Decasia* and the Horror of Hybrid Matter

Once labeled “the most explicit cinematic homage to the death of film,”¹¹⁰ Bill Morrison’s *Decasia: The State of Decay* stands as a symptom of the transitional period between analog and digital – both in terms of what was meant to be saved and what was supposed to lie ahead.¹¹¹ This fascinating audiovisual symphony, made up of deteriorating nitrate pictures and accompanied by Michael Gordon’s apocalyptic music, has been analyzed to death.¹¹² Nevertheless, when one feels the urge to digitize or even restore decomposing archival footage, especially of the nitrate era, shades of this film cannot help but reappear. *Decasia* reminds us of the extent to which the figurative and conceptual value of a film can change when the images delve into the depths of filmic matter. The indexical bond to the once photographed reality is put under permanent threat – in a perverse conjecture of Bazin’s mummy complex, it is time that triumphs over film rather than the other way around.¹¹³

This destructive impulse is not exclusive to the analog film, let alone nitrate prints. Of course, Morrison assembled his film solely out of archival footage on nitrate film stock, but the material shape of the prints he used varies greatly. Not all of them have their origin in the so-called silent era – some were allegedly produced as late as the 1950s.¹¹⁴ Despite being smoothed out by montage and immersed in the same black-and-white through duplication, the differences in the level of decay at times shine through. Furthermore, the appearance of the

¹¹⁰ Chuck Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 73.

¹¹¹ Other symptomatic archival/found footage films of this era include: *Lyrical Nitrate* (Lyrisch Nitraat; Peter Delpout, 1991), *Transparences* (Trasparenze; Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, 1998), *Crack, Brutal, Grief* (R. Bruce Elder, 2000), *Passio* (Paolo Cherchi Usai, 2006). For later “death of cinema” films, see *Chemical Intervention in (Film) History* (Jürgen Reble, 2019) or *The Philosophy of Horror: A Symphony of Film Theory* (Péter Lichter and Bori Máté, 2020).

¹¹² For analyses specifically related to the “death of cinema” issue, see, for example: Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity”; Sean Cubitt, “The Shadow,” *MIRAJ Moving Image Research and Art Journal* 2, no. 2 (2013), 187–197; Michael Betancourt, “Dread Mechanics: The Sublime Terror of Bill Morrison’s *Decasia* (2002),” *Bright Lights Film Journal*, January 14, 2015, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://brightlightsfilm.com/dread-mechanics-the-sublime-terror-of-bill-morrisons-decasia-2002/>; Bernd Herzogenrath, “Decasia. The Matter | Image: Film is also a Thing,” in *The Films of Bill Morrison: Aesthetics of the Archive*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 84–96.

¹¹³ For the issues of temporality in Morrison’s films, see: Matthew Levine, “A Poetic Archeology of Cinema: The Films of Bill Morrison,” *Found Footage Magazine* 1, no. 1 (2015), 6–15.

¹¹⁴ Betancourt, “Dread Mechanics.”

footage was not insignificantly determined by Morrison's use of an optical printer for duplication. The optical printer is a device that "re-photographs the image on an existing, processed film element onto unexposed, new film stock."¹¹⁵ Unlike the contact printer, "an image of the source element is projected through a lens onto the emulsion of the destination stock, without any physical contact between the two."¹¹⁶ While the duplication results in "a significant loss in contrast, definition and (if applicable) color saturation,"¹¹⁷ it allows for the introduction of special effects such as dissolves, mattes, or slow/fast motion – this is where the hypnotic, glacial movement in *Decasia* comes from.¹¹⁸ Thanks to the optical printer, it is even harder to distinguish whether we really see the archival films in their "Model Image" state, especially considering that most of the prints – similar to the vintage prints with Kříženecký's films – are nowadays impossible to project. Also, the film was digitized in order to edit to Michael Gordon's score,¹¹⁹ and distributed not only on 35 mm film and as a multi-screen installation but later also as a digital file,¹²⁰ a form in which it is increasingly likely to be watched – this way, even a film that is supposedly tied to the analog condition seals its hybridity. Sean Cubitt describes this multiplicity of degrading materialities aptly: "the clash of the slicing of time into frames in film and frame-by-frame scanning, and the furring of rot that pierces through the tight-wound film; both of which are crisscrossed by the step-motion that punctuates Morrison's account of their movement, and the interlace that electronic imaging brings into play. Add to these the micro-temporality of compression and decompression, and the vicissitudes of the circulation of moving images via the Internet, and surprising new effects appear."¹²¹

Crucially, though, this hybrid decay also translates into the figuration of a distinctive fictional world – a world that leaves signs of recognizable reality yet is always already infiltrated by elements of obscurity. As Michael Betancourt argues, "what unites the materials of *Decasia* is the presentation of a world on film that is undergoing fragmentation, dissolution, decay" –

¹¹⁵ Leo Enticknap, *Film Restoration: The Culture and Science of Audiovisual Heritage* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 96.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ The optical printer allowed him to re-photograph each frame multiple times. For the creative possibilities of the optical printer in avant-garde cinema, see: John Powers, "A DIY Come-On: A History of Optical Printing in Avant-Garde Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 4 (2018), 71–95.

¹¹⁹ This paradox is investigated by Nessa Johnston: Nessa Johnston, "Sounding Decay in the Digital Age: "Audio- Visions" of *Decasia* (2002) and *Lyrical Nitrate* (1991)," in *The Music and Sound of Experimental Film*, eds. Holly Rogers and Jeremy Barham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 219–232.

¹²⁰ *Decasia* was first released on DVD in 2004 by plexifilm.

¹²¹ Cubitt, "The Shadow."

most visibly in the “gaping white void” that obliterates what was once perhaps an interior in Japan.¹²² The figures, places, and objects in front of us are being disintegrated by various “glitches” of filmic matter, but they are also continuously asserted as belonging to a discernible, often familiar reality – though it may not evoke a specific place in time. As Bernd Herzogenrath recalls, Morrison deliberately chooses sequences in which “the representation engages in direct contact with the material carrier.”¹²³ For example, he mentions the scene where “a boxer is seen fighting against an amorphous blob (once presumably the image of a punching ball) threatening to swallow him.”¹²⁴ There are numerous similar moments throughout the film, sometimes even strangely metaphorical. At one instance, we see a newly born baby covered by grey-to-black mottles, reminiscent of plague spots or cancerous lesions. These emblems of destruction, watched in slow-motion, indicate that even the beginning of existence is already infiltrated by forces of extinction, making any attempts to return to an imaginary before-state doomed to failure. In other words, the (dis)figurative force of material deformations that “twist faces, burn bodies, and cut holes” becomes inherent to the fictional world, and consequently to “our world that produced these images.”¹²⁵ The inherent formal and diegetic linkage between the people, objects, and places seen in the film and the omnipresent physical distortions (as in the case of Kříženecký’s digitized films, even more visible when watched in high-resolution picture quality) as well as crawling glitches of a digital kind manifests in creating an entropic world hidden in the surface reality we inhabit.¹²⁶

Significantly, Betancourt delineates the world that emerges from this encounter through a language of terror and horror: “This horrific poetry brings us into a contemplation of just how small humans really are, how we inhabit an inhuman, alienating and indiscriminately hostile universe where all our endeavors will ultimately come to dust.”¹²⁷ One wonders whether such inhuman horror can materialize into a specific concept that would highlight the entanglement of figurative processes within the material phenomena. Eugene Thacker’s notion of the “world-without-us” could be the missing piece of the puzzle, standing not only for the

¹²² Michael Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice: Critical Failures and Post-Digital Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2017), 115.

¹²³ Herzogenrath, “Decasia,” 86.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice*, 115.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 116–117. The role of *Decasia* and Morrison’s other films in depicting an “inhospitable world” was also analyzed by Jennifer Fay, through a perspective resonant with contemporary debates on the Anthropocene. Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 201–207.

¹²⁷ Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice*, 116.

universal decay of *Decasia* but also for the alien existence of the color veil in *Grand Consecration* – strangely twisted yet integral to the figurative world of the film. In the first volume of his “Horror of Philosophy” trilogy,¹²⁸ *In the Dust of This Planet* (2011), Thacker distinguishes three distinctive worlds. First, there is the “world-for-us” (the human-centric view of the world), then the “world-in-itself” (the world as it exists in essence), and finally the “world-without-us”: “the world-without-us lies somewhere in between, in a nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific.”¹²⁹ The world-without-us becomes a platform that allows us to speak of the withdrawn dimension of the world that, nevertheless, intrudes into our lived reality in the form of constitutive otherness.

In this regard, Thacker talks explicitly about “those blind spots” at the presuppositions of our philosophical inquiry (i.e., the world being there for us) and the aim to express them “not in abstract concepts but in a whole bestiary of impossible life forms – mists, ooze, blobs, slime, clouds, and muck.”¹³⁰ Curiously, these shapes recall the Gestalts that emerge not only in classical or arthouse horror films, on which Thacker focuses, but even more literally on the surface of archival and found footage films (e.g., the blobs and mottles in *Decasia*). Examining their unfolding within (and prior to) the figurative space reveals the moving image as a world infiltrated by something that withdraws from us yet strives to make itself visible in this withdrawal. Archival footage constitutes a platform that highlights this struggle between two inherently intertwined yet mutually hostile dimensions. Thus, what if the “horror ontology” of Thacker speaks manifested directly in the filmic matter, as in the boxer’s clash with the amorphous blob in *Decasia*? What if the color veil in *Grand Consecration* constituted an impossible life form of the world-without-us, an element of ontological obscurity that, nevertheless, cannot be separated from the way we see the shadowy figures on the bridge? The crack-up, then, would serve as proof of a fundamental rupture between the world as we know it and the world that will always be beyond the scope of human thinking and action – yet a rupture that also confirms that one world cannot exist without the other.

The crack-up between figuration and materiality is significant for both *Decasia* and *Grand Consecration*; however, the difference between them lies in its origin and unfolding. Whereas

¹²⁸ Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011); Eugene Thacker, *Starry Speculative Corpse: Horror of Philosophy*, vol. 2 (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015); Eugene Thacker, *Tentacles Longer Than Night: Horror of Philosophy*, vol. 3 (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015).

¹²⁹ Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*, 11.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

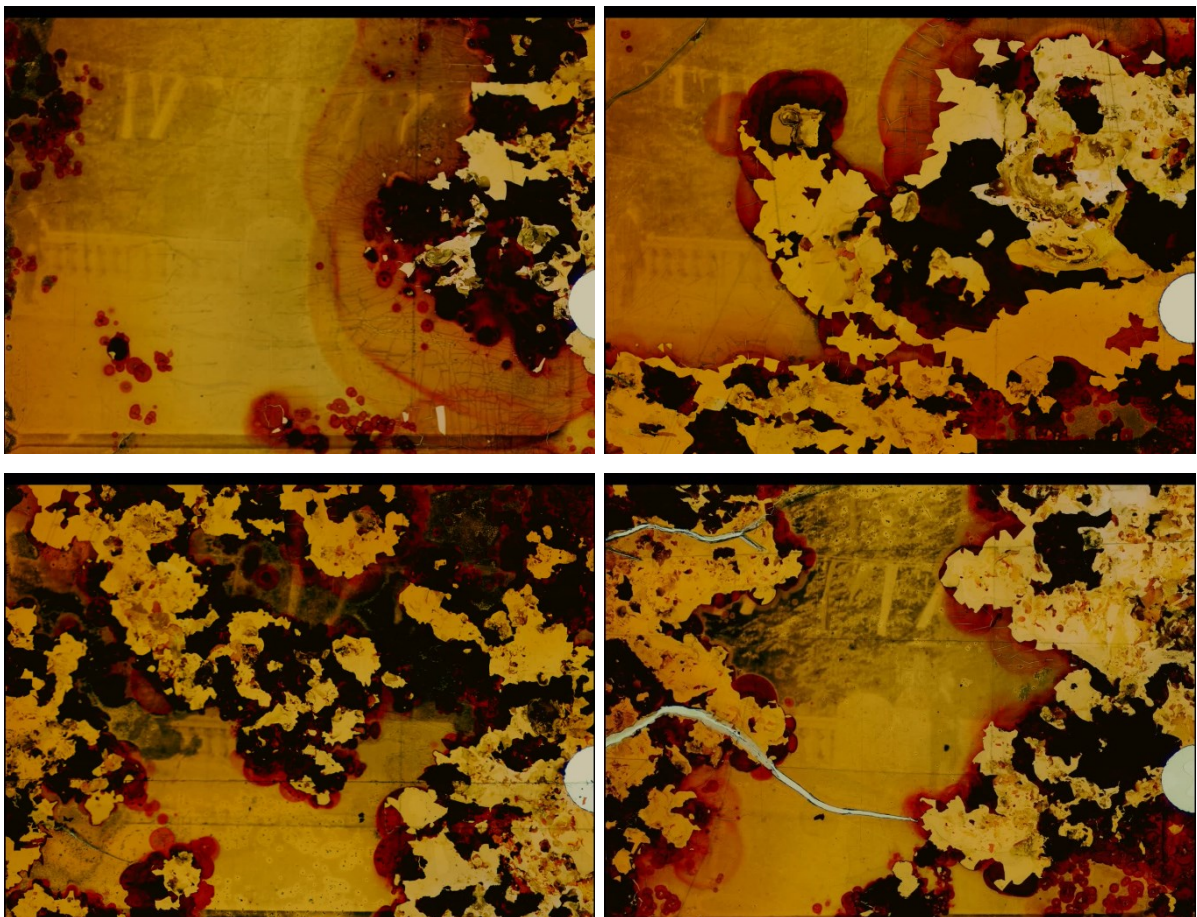
Decasia, as a work with artistic ambition, assembles shots with various cracks on purpose and then shapes them to evoke a certain aesthetic response, the crack-up in *Grand Consecration* arises unintentionally. Even if it were a product of additional tinting or toning, it is highly doubtful that such major concealment of visible figures by material actors would have been desired. There, the world-without-us intrudes accidentally, and, without any artistic or archival guidance, it may just as quickly turn back into chaos. The opening seconds of the film are particularly telling in this matter – the image is governed by a multiplicity of bursting shapes and blurs that look as if they came from an abstract experimental film, and only pausing or slowing down can reveal that there are some people and objects amid the disarray. Throughout the film, there are brief instances, particularly towards the end, when the figures are more discernible, yet even when the yellowish-orange veil is at its most transparent, the crack-up is in a permanent risk of reversing this development, dissolving into the hybrid matter and letting the world-without-us overflow everything else. How, then, can we contain and exploit this materialized death drive, intrinsic to the unfolding of moving images from their material base, an unfolding that is at the same time emancipatory and terrifying? Instead of leaving it overwhelm us, we need to examine it frame by frame.

1.4. Seeing the World-without-Us Frame by Frame

To bracket this fluctuating and reversible unfolding of the crack-up in *Grand Consecration*, we need to examine it “independently of [their] placement in a phase of motion.”¹³¹ As the film involves a rich multitude of material elements with varying effects on the figurative content, watching it in 24 frames per second and in its feeble length of 46 seconds runs the risk of engulfing the spectator with abstract noise – some of the individual specificities, including the figures walking on the bridge, may get lost. For example, the color veil evokes an impression of continuous, indivisible flux when watched “properly,” but the individual frames tell a slightly different story – when examined in the digital software, the nuances of different colors, from the clearest yellow to the most degraded red, become more pronounced, as well as the degree to which they are disclosing or unclosing the diegetic reality. Thus, echoing the materialist aesthetics of animated cartoons conceived by Hannah Frank, we should “inaugurate a study of the single frame, the single document, in which the tiniest of

¹³¹ Mihaela Mihailova, Jen Bircher, Robert Bird, Mariana Johnson, Ian Bryce Jones, Ryan Pierson, Alla Gadassik and Tim Palmer, “Teaching (Like) Hannah Frank (1984–2017): A Tribute,” *The Moving Image* 18, no. 1 (2018), 84–92.

details – a brushstroke, a shadow, an errant speck of dust – is freighted with historical and, ultimately, political weight.”¹³² In her account, the instances of fuzziness, distortion, and discoloration Bazin talks about are not barriers that we pass to satisfy our need for the material object, but parts and parcels of the image’s own materiality.¹³³ Considering that the weird shapes in Kříženecký’s film are no mere “mishaps” or details that seem out of place¹³⁴ but much more encompassing phenomena, much more inherent to its technological and aesthetic character, they should thus be guaranteed special attention. As our main interest is the emergence of the crack-up from the depths of filmic matter, choosing the first seven frames for a closer view seems appropriate. They show the crack-up at its most fragile, the material (particularly color) phenomena at their most diverse, and the filmed figures and objects at their most vulnerable, and therefore bring the horrors of the intruding world-without-us to the spotlight.



¹³² Hannah Frank, *Frame by Frame: A Materialist Aesthetics of Animated Cartoons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 15.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

Figures 1.5–1.8: *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge* (Slavnostní vysvěcení mostu císaře Františka I., 1901, source: nitrate print) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

As we can see from the stills, the unpredictable dance of colors creates an involuntary veil, an alternative surface that, nevertheless, cracks from within. The crack-up between figuration and materiality is being shaped by the structuring yellowish-orange layer which varies in its shades and hues, and any potential consistency is ruined by the intruding red blots and clouds of rot. If the crack-up cannot be ascribed to artistic appropriation, as in *Decasia*, or to any other intentional intervention, and there is a strong suspicion that it has always been present in the image, how can we make sure that it does not become reduced to noise or disposable decay? Using the words of Gilles Deleuze, what are we supposed to do “if the order of the surface is itself cracked, how could it not itself break up, how is it to be prevented from precipitating destruction, even if it meant losing all accompanying benefits – the organization of language and even life itself”?¹³⁵

The answer I propose: we must imagine the deforming colors that possibly served only technical purposes as living and aesthetically generative. In the case of additionally tinted or toned films, we could speculate whether the applied colors originally fulfilled sensual or indexical, spectacular or naturalistic, emotional or realistic functions,¹³⁶ but here, the existence of the color veil predates its essence. Therefore, we must not stipulate a hierarchy of effects and functions and instead show how the veil contributes to the distribution of elements on the surface of the image. Contemplating their play of differences frame by frame, one may, for example, discover the yellowish-orange layer as a semi-transparent “baroque” texture, spreading out the figurative and material elements across an immanent horizontal axis. Not only does this texture stage a dialectical tension between the diffused veil and the forms in the background – it also enacts a multitude of material forms with their own manners of living and dying. Thanks to the filtering layer, the singular qualities of the original nitrate image (e.g., the shifting single round perforation), the damages imposed by the passing of time (scratches, tears, and burns, as well as products of color degradation), and the occasional pixelation caused by digital compression (visible while enlarging the frames or jumping between them in the media player) intertwine without losing their distinctive qualities. The

¹³⁵ Deleuze, “Porcelain and Volcano,” 157.

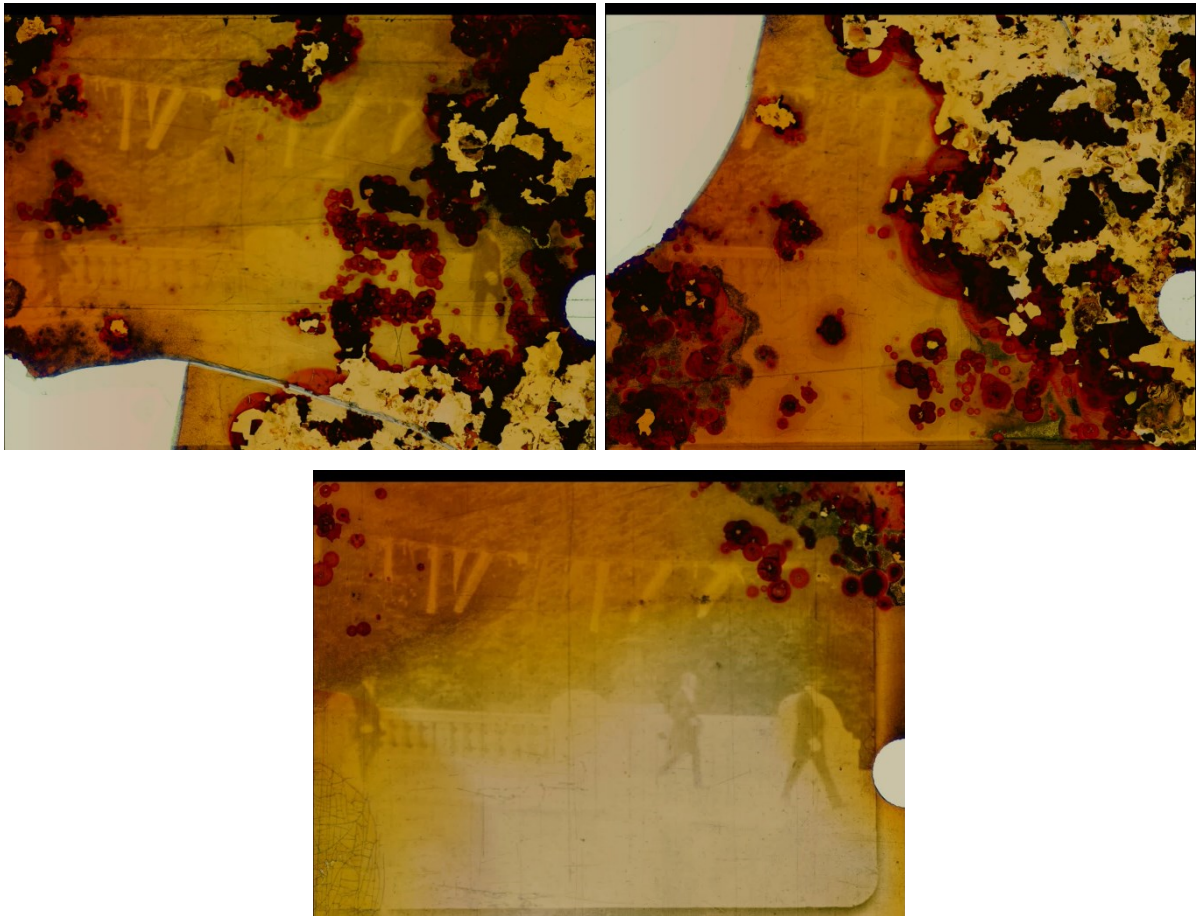
¹³⁶ Jennifer Lynn Peterson, “Rough Seas: The Blue Waters of Early Nonfiction Film,” in *The Colour Fantastic: Chromatic Worlds of Silent Cinema*, Giovanna Fossati et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 75–93.

remaining silhouettes of the figures and objects lose their privileged position and get swallowed by the veil – what they lack in discernible individual characteristics, they gain by being enmeshed in the material surface of the film strip, becoming one of the things waiting to be “touched” by the grazing eye of the spectator. Thus, the respective scene gains an aesthetic shape that is not as chiseled as in *Decasia* but all the more diverse.

Conversely, the red color, oscillating between lighter and darker tones, signals the breaking point at which the material carrier stops being a membrane onto the world-for-us and intrudes upon it like a disease, manifest in small circular dots which are often organized into denser clusters. Again, one can encounter such blots within the decaying tinted or toned films (though rarely in this scope and frequency), but they can be at least identified as signs of degradation within an otherwise intentionally designed and uniformed color structure. In *Grand Consecration*, there is no such hierarchy, and the yellowish-orange layer might be a product of decay as well, so the role of red blots in the aesthetic message of the film cannot be automatically perceived as secondary or derivative. As the color veil’s origin remains unknown, the red dots may no longer be recognized as aliens within a prescribed color layer but reinterpreted as inherent features of the multilayered color world of every single frame. Furthermore, we cannot underestimate their potential figurative function: for example, in the fifth frame (Fig. 1.9), we can see how the assemblies of red dots encircle two characters on the bridge – symbolically highlighting their potential annihilation by otherworldly forces yet also foregrounding them as discernible subjects within the diegesis. The closer we zoom in on the red blots, the more we are inclined to acknowledge how even the most homogeneous surface is made out of tiny dots (grains or pixels) that can easily turn into something else, and may potentially lead to redrawing the surface of the image according to different principles.

Finally, in a few places, the mixing and blurring of colors with the figures gives way to sprawling clouds that seem as if they were indifferent both to the content of the image and the speculative meaning of the veil. At this point, the world-without-us in its formlessness and color indistinguishability fossilizes the swarming of figurative and material signs on the veil and dissolves them into the abstract humming of the material world. However, even these seemingly dead zones of the image reveal a peculiar double movement, with the darker colors spiraling towards inert matter and the lighter ones towards a certain kind of X-ray vision, which reveals that the basest veil cannot be scraped away – regardless of whether by artists, archivists, or ravages of time. There is still that (curious) yellow, not black-and-white, and if

we wanted to get closer to the world we know (or once knew), we would have to erase all the figures and objects along with it.



Figures 1.9–1.11: *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge* (Slavnostní vysvěcení mostu císaře Františka I., 1901, source: nitrate print) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

Where is the place of the human in this material universe? At first glance, the features of the world-for-us appear hijacked from their natural environment – buried deep within the phantasmagoria of whirling colors, appearing “so ancient [they are] alien.”¹³⁷ The contours of the bridge, flags waving in the wind, and the occasional passing figures do not belong to the three-dimensional space they once inhabited; instead, they are immersed into the multi-color assemblage of the print’s surface. Even when the figures are at their most visible (as in Fig. 1.11), they are no more than anonymous walking suits appearing or disappearing. The model situation of Frank’s frame-by-frame method thereby gets reversed: now we do not discover flies zigzagging across the screen, nor even accidental brushstrokes of the animators,¹³⁸ but

¹³⁷ Eugene Thacker, *After Life* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 2.

¹³⁸ Frank, *Frame by Frame*, 51–52.

the human figures who once served as protagonists of the film. Thanks to the possibility to zoom in on particular places in the frame, enabled by digital technology, the people threatened by weird shapes can be “rescued” – not by reversing the clock (as it is highly probable that the color veil has always already been there), but by pointing towards the future. This approach spells the beginning of a constellation in which the figurative content will need to be actively searched for, despite the pixilation that zooming brings even with better-quality digital files. Later in the film, when the number of people crossing the bridge grows exponentially, lots of things can be discovered within the mass, notably the slight differences in the behavior of the characters towards the apparatus, or, by extension, towards the unseen and yet unthinkable deformations of the world they occupy. And maybe, one day we could find even the Austro-Hungarian emperor Franz Joseph I, who was supposedly present at the consecration...

1.5. Coda: The Death of Cinema Extended into Eternity

The examination of Kříženecký's *Grand Consecration* in its newly digitized form served to highlight the ontological dimension of the crack-up. The mysterious presence of the color veil in *Grand Consecration* may not yet have a clearly known origin, but the hypothesis about a unique, possibly even undesired quality of the Lumière nitrate print stipulates that any hopes of separation between the material carrier and figurative content are doomed right from the start – possibly even before the specific film was made. Although it would be foolish to say that the National Film Archive presents the film just as it was, the weird combination of high-definition quality and preserved intrinsic deformations and instabilities has once again brought attention to the fundamental non-identity of film – its chronical indecision in what it is going to be, either in terms of which material components support it or what (or whether at all) it is supposed to represent. This way, we can rethink the tension between figurative and material elements, visible in experimental found footage films such as *Decasia*, as inseparable from the struggle that has always-already been part of the endlessly variable existence of the moving image and does not necessarily have to be added to it. If there is anything original or authentic in Kříženecký's images, it is their variations of the crack-up, and the available digital technology makes this quality better discernible than ever before. As a result, the yellowish-orange layer is allowed to become an aesthetic potentiality that filters the figurative universe through the hybrid, distributed matter composed of analog and digital, extrinsic and intrinsic, human- and non-human-induced entities.

Thus, the digitized *Grand Consecration* becomes another emblem not only of the death of cinema but also of what comes ahead. The ability to examine the operations of inhuman and hybrid filmic matter, as well as to search for the remnants of the human world, surrenders death to eternal repetition. One can hear the echoes of Nietzsche, Deleuze, and Blanchot, or, more specifically, the good old Godardian dictum “cinema is ending, but never stops ending.”¹³⁹ Nevertheless, Digital Kříženecký employs this perpetual motion of destruction in a less metaphoric, more literal sense. Katherine Groo employs the figure of fire for describing this ontogenetic role of death and destruction for film history and theory, stating that rather than trying to overcome or ward against the flames of film history, we should “let it burn.”¹⁴⁰ The case of *Grand Consecration* provokes us towards radicalizing this gesture, as its cracked-up features wait to be replayed, remixed, and pushed forward. The color veil signals the inevitable death of cinema, but also its possible “prolongation,” “extension into eternity,” as Johannes Binotto would say.¹⁴¹ Rather than merely expressing fascination with these destructive impulses, or even fetishizing them, we should intervene – open the digital files in our video-editing software, discern and isolate the places which may seem the most threatened by material evisceration, and seek to turn their death(s) into an alternative figuration of a life-force to come. Echoing the title of Rainer Kohlberger’s experimental film, we should ensure that the images “keep burning.”¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Quoted from: Hillary Radner and Alistair Fox, *Raymond Bellour: Cinema and the Moving Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 80.

¹⁴⁰ Groo, “Let It Burn.”

¹⁴¹ Johannes Binotto, “Tributes – Pulse: A Requiem for the 20th Century: Death | Drive | Image,” in *The Films of Bill Morrison: Aesthetics of the Archive*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 241.

¹⁴² I am referring to the film *keep that dream burning* (Rainer Kohlberger, 2017).

2. Do Archivists Dream of Electric Horses?

Spring Races, Static Electricity, and the Quadruple Logic of Indexicality

May 10, 1908. The first day of the horse races at Velká Chuchle near Prague, captured on film by Jan Kříženecký. At first glance, we see a relatively straightforward attempt to report what is going on during a notable social event: crowds of people marching towards the stadium, horses and jockeys getting ready, audience in-between watching the action and goofing around, honorary persons being photographed, the fury of the sport itself. Nevertheless, there are other, non-human actors entering the image and congesting the visible world. Black and white dots, scratches, and holes, all of them pointing to the fact that the film covered a long distance in time to get to the present form. What also comes into view, perhaps more timidly, are material signs – most curiously, lightning bolts that occasionally hit even the horse racers – that harken back towards the film's very origin.



Figures 2.1–2.4: *The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague* (První den jarních dostihů pražských; Jan Kříženecký, 1908, source: original negative) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

While features such as the yellowish-orange layer on the vintage print of *Grand Consecration* clearly distort the figurative content of the films, others, such as the lightning bolts *The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague* (První den jarních dostihů pražských; 1908, source: original negative), are more subtle, almost waiting to be discovered. They appear even in films that survived in a remarkable technical condition, with a beautiful and clear photographic image. These signs gain particular visibility in the digitized original negatives in which the photographic qualities (soft black-and-white contrast, depth of field, and grain of the image) are preserved to the highest extent.¹⁴³ Again, the decision not to retouch was significant as it would make the photographic features of the original negatives disappear.¹⁴⁴ The digitization of the films “as they exist today” does not necessarily make them more “authentic,” but it draws attention to how even the slightest technological feature can transform the aesthetic effects of film and also its presumed bond to reality, or, more specifically, to the original event that was being filmed.

The material signs in *Spring Races* – signature single round sprocket holes on each side of a film frame,¹⁴⁵ remnants of fuzz from the velvet strip placed at the projector gate, or marks of electrical discharge on the emulsion – are windows onto the real world of the Lumière film technology, which were hard to get rid of even if one wanted to. Seeing that the amount of film stock was very limited, especially to filmmakers who had to buy all their materials from abroad (such as Jan Kříženecký),¹⁴⁶ the operators must have thought twice before doing multiple takes. Also, as the creative post-production as we know it today was practically non-existent, editing out frames with undesirable elements was a risky endeavor, particularly when they covered a sequence of images.¹⁴⁷ Remember the words of Bolesław Matuszewski: “Perhaps the cinematograph does not give history in its entirety, but at least what it does deliver is incontestable and of an absolute truth. Ordinary photography admits of retouching,

¹⁴³ Jeanne Pommeau and Jiří Anger, “The Digitization of Jan Kříženecký’s Films,” *Illuminace* 31, no. 1 (2019), 105. See also: Jeanne Pommeau, “The Digitisation of Kříženecký’s Films [videocommentary],” in *Filmy Jana Kříženeckého / The Films of Jan Kříženecký*, ed. Jiří Anger (DVD / Blu-ray, Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2019).

¹⁴⁴ Pommeau and Anger, “The Digitization of Jan Kříženecký’s Films,” 106.

¹⁴⁵ The films were shot on film stock from the Lumière brothers with specific perforation – one round sprocket hole on each side of the film frame, instead of the now standard four angular perforations. Pommeau and Anger, “The Digitization of Jan Kříženecký’s Films,” 105.

¹⁴⁶ According to the invoices preserved in the National Technical Museum Prague, Kříženecký bought film stock from the Lumière brothers at least two times – first in 1898, then in 1907.

¹⁴⁷ On “provisional” forms of editing in early cinema, see, for instance, Scott Higgins, “The Silent Screen, 1895–1927: Editing,” in *Editing and Special/Visual Effects*, eds. Charlie Keil and Kristen Whissel (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 22–36 or Genevieve Yue, *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 73–101.

to the point of transformation. But try to retouch, in an identical way for each figure, these thousand or twelve hundred, almost microscopic negatives...!”¹⁴⁸

This comment may seem naïve from today’s perspective – when there are so many possibilities to manipulate images according to our needs, and when the idea of an “incontestable and absolute truth” sounds ridiculous – but in one key respect, it can still teach us a lesson. The “reality” that we see on the screen does not result only from verisimilitude but also from respecting the technological conditions that shaped the filmed event. From this perspective, Digital Kříženecký may draw its connection to past reality from two seemingly contradictory things. First, we must recognize the filmed figures, objects, and places as belonging to a lived world that was once captured by the camera. Second, we must acknowledge that, due to the non-intrusive approach to digitization, the signs of film technology used during the shooting remained visible in the image.

This chapter aims to investigate how the inconspicuous physical signs in Kříženecký’s digitized films, most notably the lightning bolts as the marks of static electricity (the so-called “static marks”), influence our notion of “indexical” relationship between moving images and reality. The indexicality of film, generally understood as a causal connection between the object of reality and its photographic reproduction, remains one of the defining concepts that serve to distinguish what cinema was and how (or whether at all) it persists in the digital age. Despite many accounts spelling its demise,¹⁴⁹ indexicality still haunts the contemporary production of moving images, and not just those shot on analog film. Processes such as digital restoration, online circulation, or artistic appropriation give birth to various forms of hybrid moving images that make us see formerly analog films and their supposedly privileged bond to reality in a different light. Among other things, these forms make us consider the role of specific technological agents in determining the recognizability of pro-filmic reality and the extent to which their visible presence in the image is desirable.

¹⁴⁸ Boleslas Matuszewski, “A New Source of History,” *Film History* 7, no. 3 (1995), 323.

¹⁴⁹ 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); Dan Streible, “Moving Image History and the F-Word; Or, “Digital Film” Is an Oxymoron,” *Film History* 25, no. 1–2 (2013), 227–235; Miriam De Rosa and Vinzenz Hediger, “Post-what? Post-when? A Conversation on the ‘Posts’ of Post-media and Post-cinema,” *Cinéma & Cie* 16, no. 26–27 (2016), 9–20; Christopher Ball, Meghanne Barker, Elizabeth Edwards, Tomáš Kolich, W. J. T. Mitchell, Daniel Morgan and Constantine V. Nakassis, “Opening Up the Indexicality of the Image, Again: A Virtual Roundtable,” *Semiotic Review*, 2020, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://semioticroview.com/ojs/index.php/sr/article/view/62>.

Whereas in *Grand Consecration* any indexicality depended on a temporary resolution of the horrors of filmic matter, the digitized films with comparatively clear image quality let any signs of materiality emerge within a recognizable fictional world. As I argue, *Spring Races* and other films by Kříženecký that preserve clear contours of the world that was once photographically reproduced yet also contain multiple signs of material intervention neither erase indexicality nor do they necessarily transform it. Rather, they show it in a kind of convex mirror that highlights the concept's fundamental ambiguity. The indexicality of film involves the capacity to preserve "real" figures, objects, and places that were once captured by the camera as well as the material-technological conditions which allowed for such capture in the first place. What happens when one form of indexicality starts to interfere with the existence of the other? When even seemingly non-essential elements such as the static marks disturb the purity of the represented world or even impact upon the figurative processes and aesthetic effects of the films, indexicality reveals itself in its multifaceted form.

The question is: wherein lies our sense of reality that was originally captured and preserved on film? Do the static marks disturb or deform this reality, or do they constitute a surplus that the film medium adds to the represented world? Are they a sign of the irreducibility of a spontaneous encounter between camera and reality, or do they indicate a grounding of any realistic representation in the technological dispositif of its time? Is their presence in the digitized artifacts a homage to the past, or an acknowledgment that they are an inherent feature of filmic ontology? The following analysis, centered around Kříženecký's film *The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague* as a specific example that highlights the ontological and aesthetic role of static marks in early cinema and archival artifacts, strives to provide (however provisional) answers – answers that lead in an 'and...and' rather than "either-or" direction. A distinctive scene with horses seemingly hit by electricity (or "electric horses") demonstrates that moments when the bifurcations of indexicality become most visible can be exactly those moments when the crack-up unfolds.

2.1. Cinematic Indexicality and its Relation to Reality

The notion of film as an indexical medium has its theoretical roots in the thoughts of André Bazin, particularly in his essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1945). To build upon Chapter 1, Bazin argues that our belief in the causal link between reality and its photographic reproduction does not reside primarily in the iconic resemblance between

photographed and real objects, but in the automatic, apparently non-interventionist and unbiased character of the photographic record. The photographic and, by extension, cinematic image may not exactly reproduce the object “as it was,” but none of our critical objections can deny that the things we see in the picture were once present to the anonymous eye of the camera and that, by means of our act of watching, they affirm and prolong their existence.¹⁵⁰ The principle of indexicality¹⁵¹ ensures that the image establishes a connection between the past encounter and the present spectatorial experience. No matter how stylized the image appears or to what extent it succumbs to decay, it links the reality that was being captured in the past to the present moment of recognizing which aspects of this original event prevailed and how they conform to our current perception of reality.

This primacy of indexicality constitutes a framework which allows us to understand any photographic image as real or “realistic.” As Dudley Andrew, one of Bazin’s chief interpreters, claims, “realism to [Bazin] is not primarily a stylistic category. It is an automatic effect of photographic technology drawing on an irrational psychological desire.”¹⁵² For Bazin, the mechanical causality between the object and its reproduction functions as indexical only insofar as it satisfies our “obsession with realism,” “our appetite for illusion by a mechanical reproduction in the making of which man plays no part.”¹⁵³ To put it more precisely, we read images as indexical because they fulfil our longing for presence, our desire to preserve moments that we can no longer experience directly. As we affirm the bond between film and reality, and also between subject and object, we are able to reassure our place in the lived world as perceiving subjects who can control the ravages of time.

Nonetheless, as Philip Rosen reminds us, this psychological complex (which Bazin generally calls the “mummy complex”) is, in essence, contradictory. On the one hand, the specific contours of reality are halted in time and preserved in the form of rectangular frames, in a way

¹⁵⁰ André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 9–16.

¹⁵¹ Bazin himself does not use the term “indexicality.” The one who contextualized Bazin’s thought in semiotics was Peter Wollen, see Peter Wollen, “Ontology and Materialism in Film,” in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 189–207.

¹⁵² Dudley Andrew, “Foreword to the 2004 Edition,” in André Bazin, *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), xv. See also: Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 3–41; Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is! Bazin’s Quest and Its Charge* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Burke Hilsabeck, “The “Is” in *What Is Cinema?*: On André Bazin and Stanley Cavell,” *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 2 (2016), 25–42; Jeff Fort, “André Bazin’s Eternal Returns: An Ontological Revision,” *Film-Philosophy* 25, no. 1 (2021), 42–61.

¹⁵³ Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” 12.

that lets us experience the real without direct participation and within a controlled environment. On the other hand, the reality that we perceive on screen is itself taking place in time, and therefore it can “paradoxically open the spectating subject to the concrete, hence the flow of time and the fact of change.”¹⁵⁴ This paradox may cause that the indexed reality may include more elements than it was meant to be preserved – not only those that infiltrated into the image due to aging (e.g., those white dots, scratches, and holes in *Spring Races*) but also the invisible actors that were present to the shooting event (e.g., perforations, fuzz, and static marks).

Among other things, the paradox of “change mummified” effectively brings to question which components and properties of the image enable the film to be perceived as a historical document of the real. Does such document result solely from a credible approximation of the filmed objects, or also from elements that were added to it by means of the filming process? Daniel Morgan focuses on Bazin’s argument that “photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty,”¹⁵⁵ or, similarly, “that photography actually contributes something to the order of natural creation instead of providing a substitute for it.”¹⁵⁶ Quotes such as these would imply a continuity between photography and objects in the world, and thus that its creation adds up something to the captured reality rather than just copying it or alluding to it. In other words, the camera does not only represent the figures, objects, and places in front of it – by the very act of making a recognizable technological reproduction of reality, it creates a surplus that enriches our vision of this reality with a distinctive non-human perspective. Consequently, the films of Jan Kříženecký do not have to be understood as realistic just because they are mostly actualities, supposedly authentic reports on current events – accidental looks into the camera as well as many material elements that come into view evoke a certain reality effect on their own terms.

2.2. Between Trace and Deixis

¹⁵⁴ Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 39.

¹⁵⁵ Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” 14.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 15. Daniel Morgan, “Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (2006), 443–481.

In this context, it is worth pointing out that the term index, coined by semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce,¹⁵⁷ has always been torn between two different, seemingly incompatible meanings. Mary Ann Doane demonstrates that the original index has two definitions: index as trace and index as deixis.¹⁵⁸ First, the index as trace, exemplified by the footprint or the photograph, “implies a material connection between sign and object as well as an insistent temporality – the reproducibility of a past moment.”¹⁵⁹ This understanding of the index necessarily aligns it with historicity – with the notion that at one point the represented object actually existed – and as such, it stresses the temporal distance that the sign had to cover to get from its origin to the present reception. Second, the index as deixis, “the pointing finger,” “does exhaust itself in the moment of its implementation and is ineluctably linked to presence. There is always a gap between sign and object, and touch here is only figurative.”¹⁶⁰ In this case, it is more like a gesture that expresses nothing but its own unfolding, that points to the context of the sign’s occurrence and its impact on the signified object. While the interpretation of index as trace has been prevalent in film studies for many decades, examining its deictic function might help us imagine the “surplus” that film brings to reality by capturing it. This surplus may consist in diegetic details that seem out of place, weird gestures or looks, accidental interventions of figures and objects into the frame, but also in the intrusions of the filmic matter itself. As Peirce explains, some indices exceed the operation of merely guaranteeing that an object exists; they also show something of the object (e.g., the outline of a foot or the lines of a fingerprint). These signs do not just assure us that something once was, but also promise the past presence of the very things we can see.¹⁶¹

Furthermore, this double logic of indexicality is multiplied by the existence of two interrelated registers that can be indexed – one related to represented reality that is portrayed in the figurative content and the other to technological reality that springs to the surface through material interventions. Thus, the manifestations of indexicality in the most transparent and “realistic” of Kříženecký’s digitized films are conditioned by two blocs of concepts – figuration-materiality and trace-deixis – whose mutual relationship conditions the

¹⁵⁷ Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings. Vol. 1*, eds. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

¹⁵⁸ Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity.”

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Vol. 4* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), paras. 447–448. See also: Katherine Groo, “Let It Burn: Film Historiography in Flames,” *Discourse* 41, no. 1 (2019), 13.

appearance of the crack-up. In *Spring Races*, what we see on a superficial level is a figuration of what happened during the horse race. Tracking and panning shots, allowed by the additions Kříženecký made to the original Lumière Cinématographe,¹⁶² alternate with static shots, scenes of everyday life and the audience intertwine with scenes of the races, in order to construct a realist quasi-narrative of the event.¹⁶³ Yet, there are also pro-filmic moments that do not conform to this narrative entirely: men swiftly withdrawing from the camera, photographers jumping into the frame, blurred horses jumping over fences. Such moments may not come to the foreground but maintain glimpses of the original experience of catching life unaware. From the materialist point of view, various signs of wear and tear inevitably congest the visible world – black and white dots, scratches, holes – all of them pointing to the fact that the film covered a long distance in time to get to the presented digitized form. The intrinsic signs of the used technology – perforations, fuzz, and static marks – constitute specific gestures that signify the film’s coming into being – the original event of capturing and transforming reality by technological means. Still, none of these elements can be understood as exclusive to one of the concepts, nor can they exist in isolation from others – the real point of interest is their mutual intermingling that, at the same time, presupposes a specificity of all the figurative and material entities involved.

Given this chapter’s focus on material intrusions into pro-filmic reality, is there a way we could distinguish the aesthetic and ontological function of material traces and deixes? Scholars who support the indexical argument often tend to mix the two or ignore the second aspect altogether. Doane would describe the scratches, dots, and holes in *Spring Races* as “hollowed-out” signs: “They are limited to the assurance of an existence; they provide no insight into the nature of their objects; they . . . simply indicate that something is ‘there.’”¹⁶⁴ Katherine Groo, building upon Peirce’s and Doane’s arguments, would claim that these signs assure the vulnerability of filmic matter to “a whole range of external forces, interactions, and accidents,”¹⁶⁵ yet her account suggests that these external forces are limited to the time period

¹⁶² The new additions that enabled him to film longer shots, and also to film more consecutive shots, were primarily the double exchangeable magazines for film stock (instead of a single magazine for 17.5 metres of film) and the viewfinder, which allowed him to watch the action while shooting. Petr Kliment and Jeanne Pommeau, “The Presentation of Kříženecký’s Cinematograph [videocommentary],” in *Filmy Jana Kříženeckého / The Films of Jan Kříženecký*, ed. Jiří Anger (DVD / Blu-ray, Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2019).

¹⁶³ Kateřina Svatoňová, “Kříženecký’s Films in the Context of Industrial Exhibitions [videocommentary],” in *Filmy Jana Kříženeckého / The Films of Jan Kříženecký*, ed. Jiří Anger (DVD / Blu-ray, Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2019).

¹⁶⁴ Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity,” 133, 135.

¹⁶⁵ Groo, “Let It Burn,” 13.

after the film was made. Neither does it become clear what happens when the filmic matter and the figurative dimension of the image encounter each other, i.e., when the crack-up emerges. In a different text, Groo talks about bringing the “internal” features of ethnographic cinema – its images, cinematography, and compositional patterns – into conversation with its “external” qualities, with the “rips, tears, and textures.”¹⁶⁶ She pursues this argument by “comparing the landscapes we see in ethnographic cinema to the landscape, or physical surface, that film itself actually is.”¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, she mentions a few examples of archival films in which the communication between figurative and material landscapes affects the aesthetic meaning, such as *Between the Nile and the Congo* (Tusschen Nijl en Congo; Paul Julien, ca 1930), where a cloud of locusts on the horizon “imitates the shimmering pockmarks of celluloid deterioration.”¹⁶⁸

As intriguing as Groo’s account is, my contention lies in her ignorance of the origin of this material intrusion. As if the crack-up might emerge anytime, as long as matter collides with the represented reality. When the material-technological substrate starts to communicate with the figurative content, it is worth asking whether such alteration of the image can result only from the decaying traces of the past, or also from the deictic gestures of the past presence. For example, the unnerving movement of both sprocket holes within and out of the frame in *Spring Races* signifies that the film strip once passed through the fluctuating cinematographic apparatus – as the images were being created. A trace of reality could have been preserved only because the film stock submitted to the violence of the feeding mechanism, which was even stronger because of the original violence of the perforations.¹⁶⁹ Such an example indicates that the act of photographing or filming could really add something notable to the figurative image, something that might actively participate in the figurative processes, and, crucially, something that does not have to be discovered or manufactured “ex post.” Consider, for example, the found footage films of Gustav Deutsch, Peter Forgács, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi and other artists who appropriate decaying archival fragments to

¹⁶⁶ Katherine Groo, *Bad Film Histories: Ethnography and the Early Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 42.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁶⁹ At the outset of cinema, perforations were often perceived as a “weakening” of film: the single pair of sprocket holes Lumière brothers used was a compromise, ensuring that the perforated film strip ‘would be less susceptible to tear or break from the impact, however minimal, of the claws’ while still being able to advance steadily through the film gate. Benoît Turquety, *Inventing Cinema: Machines, Gestures and Media History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

highlight temporal distance between then and now,¹⁷⁰ or, more precisely, between figures from the past and signs of wear and tear that circulate across the image. No matter how respectful and non-intrusive their approach to the recycled footage is, anytime we see traces of decay or deices of the filming process, they always come in quotation marks. Bill Morrison's *Decasia*, which was so useful in the previous chapter, offers a variety of indexical signs, yet the images we see are dispersed between different materials from different eras and disconnected from their original sources to such an extent that distinguishing traces and deices becomes a challenge. Not that it is necessarily a bad thing, of course, but as long as the images are taken out of their context and reassembled for artistic purposes, the indexical signs of the "original" images inevitably blur and become more abstract. In the case of Digital Kříženecký, the trace-deixis issue can be examined concretely, through the minute details of the films, with attention to its ontological as well as aesthetic dimension.

Of course, the fact that the digitization of Jan Kříženecký's films left the deictic material gestures unretouched does not make them identical to the analog originals as primary historical sources.¹⁷¹ However, we can still argue that the indexical bond perseveres. As Tom Gunning claims, storage of information in terms of numerical data does not eliminate indexicality: digital images, just as their analog predecessors, "can serve as passport photographs and other legal evidence or documents, which ordinary photographs supply."¹⁷² He argues that both digital and analog photographs depend on elaborate procedures that take place prior to the resulting imprint of reality. Just as digital photography transforms its data into an intermediary form, the analog one involves complicated mediation of lens, film stock, exposure rate, type of shutter, and other elements, not to mention processes of developing and printing.¹⁷³ The deictic gestures in *Spring Races*, which constitute such mediation, are made visible in a crisp high-definition image and susceptible to being examined frame by frame, thereby enabling us to reconstruct the technological actors that took part in the film's coming

¹⁷⁰ See, for example: Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London: Routledge, 2014); Jihoon Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital: Hybrid Moving Images in the Post-Media Age* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 145–195.

¹⁷¹ Franziska Hellerová, "Proč se zabývat dějinami filmu? Několik poznámek k otázce, jak digitalizace mění náš obraz minulosti," *Illuminace* 27, no. 2 (2015), 41–56.

¹⁷² Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs," *Nordicom Review* 25, no. 1–2 (2004), 40. See also: Tom Gunning, "Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality," *Differences* 18, no. 1 (2007), 29–52; Julia Noordegraaf, "The Analog Film Projector in Marijke van Warmerdam's Digitized Film Installations," in *Exposing the Film Apparatus: The Film Archive as a Research Laboratory*, eds. Giovanna Fossati and Annie van den Oever (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 211–222.

¹⁷³ Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index?," 40.

into being. In the case of electrostatic discharge in *Spring Races*, digital compression and possible alterations during scanning play only a minor role. They do not efface that the encounter between the unplugged Lumière apparatus and static electricity, or between the lightning bolts and the human and animal actors being captured on camera respectively, once took place. What does this performative technological gesture mean for the formation of distinctive figures and objects in the moving images is examined in the following lines – first generally, to present the issue of static electricity in proper context, then specifically, through analyzing the role of static marks in *Spring Races*.

2.3. Pleasures and Threats of Static Electricity

Static electricity marks (or just static marks) on the film emulsion are typical symptoms of fragility and instability of the cinematographic apparatus during the early days of cinema. They could be described as “physical defects in a film image caused by exposure to the light from the discharge of static electricity before raw film is processed, especially in areas with low humidity.”¹⁷⁴ The way the film strip fluctuated through the hand-cranked camera, and also the nature of the raw nitrate stock, made film particularly sensitive to electrostatic charges. “Rolls of negative would often release these charges as they were unwinding in the camera and cause exposure of the film which results in lightning-like streaks after processing.”¹⁷⁵ These marks were generally understood as technological mishaps or malfunctions waiting to be overcome: the first official organization of cinematographers in the USA even named itself The Static Club of America, and one of its initial goals was to “diagnose and troubleshoot” the dilemma with static electricity charges.¹⁷⁶ In the case of the Lumière Cinématographe and film emulsion, the “problem” seemed even worse. One may recall the elementary school mantra: “When an ebonite rod is rubbed with fox fur,

¹⁷⁴ Richard W. Kroon, *A/V A to Z: An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Media, Entertainment and Other Audiovisual Terms* (Jefferson and London: McFarland & Company 2010), 645. See also: Paul Read and Mark-Paul Meyer, eds., *Restoration of Motion Picture Film* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2000), 338.

¹⁷⁵ “Static mark,” *Glossary of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia*, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/preservation/preservation-glossary/static-mark>.

¹⁷⁶ “Introduced in the early 1900s, the iconic Pathé Studio was the primary camera used from the early to mid Silent Era, based on a patented Lumière design,” *The American Society of Cinematographers*, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://theasc.com/asc/asc-museum-pathe-studio>. The Static Club of America served a variety of functions. One of the Club’s early members, Arthur Miller, mentioned that the Club “provided the chance for members to discuss problems of lighting, standardisation of frame-line, and other matters concerned with the art of cinematography” and also served as a “social-gathering place.” Quoted in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1998), 109.

electrostatic charge is created,” i.e., electrons move from fur to the ebonite rod, hence ebonite becomes negatively charged and fur gets a positive. Now imagine that the film roll is the ebonite rod and the velvet strip placed at the projector gate is the fox fur, and you have the reason why. Even in their most polished form to date, resulting from the digital restoration led by Thierry Frémaux,¹⁷⁷ white static marks in Lumière’s films remain visible – whether in the form of singular lightning bolts or larger tree-branch shapes.¹⁷⁸

Despite their presence in numerous films of that period, these marks remain an understudied phenomenon, often described as signs of decay and destruction – one source even speaks of “ruination.”¹⁷⁹ On the other hand, they seem hard (perhaps even undesirable) to get rid of. For example, see a recent video of The Museum of Modern Art called *The IMAX of the 1890s | HOW TO SEE the First Movies* (2019). While clearly designed to highlight the startlingly crisp and stable quality of the digitally restored 68mm nitrate prints from the MoMA collections, the film still takes static marks into account, albeit as mere flies in the ointment.¹⁸⁰ If we return to the digitized Lumière films, whereas other signs of intrinsic deformation, such as image instability or monochromatic layer on some of the surviving prints, are nowhere to be seen, static electricity persists. It may be because the static marks are difficult to retouch without damaging the image’s content, or that the “general public” does not find them as disturbing as, for example, a trembling image. The static marks are more of a curiosity that becomes lost in an otherwise crystal-clear imagery, soothing music, and Thierry Frémaux’s nostalgic voice-over that sutures all the works into a single narrative.¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, they are there – as fleeting signs of a past encounter between the Cinématographe, the film strip passing through the camera (or later through the printer), the operator who is turning the crank, and the filmed figures in their environment. The question

¹⁷⁷ See the DVD / Blu-ray collection: Bertrand Tavernier and Thierry Frémaux, eds., *Lumière ! Le cinématographe 1895–1905* (DVD / Blu-ray, Lyon: Institut Lumière, 2015), and also the film *Lumière!* (Lumière! L’aventure commence; Thierry Frémaux, 2016).

¹⁷⁸ See, for example, *Automobile Accident* (Accident d’automobile; 1903–1905) for the first type of static electricity, and *Westminster Bridge* (Pont de Westminster; 1896), *Concorde Square (obelisks and fountains)* (Place de la Concorde (obélisque et fontaines); 1897), or *Indochina: Children Gathering Rice Scattered by Western Women* (Enfants annamites ramassant des sapèques devant la Pagode des Dames; 1900) for the second type.

¹⁷⁹ “Introduced in the early 1900s” (footnote 110). See also: Brian Wright, “Film’s Worst Enemies (7 Common Film Issues),” *CineStillfilm*, February 24, 2017, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://cinestillfilm.com/blogs/news/film-s-worst-enemies-7-common-film-issues>.

¹⁸⁰ Sean Yetter, “The IMAX of the 1890s | HOW TO SEE the First Movies,” *The Museum of Modern Art*, 2019, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBNwiPgknn8&feature=youtu.be>. The static electricity footage comes from the film *Queen Victoria’s Last Visit to Ireland* (1900).

¹⁸¹ See Benoît Turquety, “Lumière ! Le Cinématographe 1895-1905. Les films Lumière présentés par Bertrand Tavernier et Thierry Frémaux,” *1895*, no. 78 (2016), 209–214.

is: what importance do we ascribe to them? Are they obstacles to seeing the past reality or documents of how this reality has always-already been shaped by technological actors? Are they inconspicuous curiosities for archivists and film historians, or potential actors in the figurative processes?

The static marks do not just evoke fear of tainting the captured reality – they also recall the ambiguous attitude of the Lumière film technology towards electricity in general. On the one hand, the Cinématographe itself, unlike the apparatuses designed by Thomas Alva Edison, functioned independently of electrical energy. As a hand-cranked machine, it functioned solely on the interaction between the camera and its operator, and it could be used in any setting. According to Benoît Turquety, the unplugged apparatus was paradoxically more autonomous and versatile: he sees the resistance to electrification as something that allowed the machine to operate in symbiosis with any environment in which it found itself. In terms of capturing the contingent reality, it presented an advantage, albeit difficult to maintain and orchestrate. Nadia Bozak sums it up aptly: “The cameraman circulated freely outdoors, catching life on the street, with its conflicting planes of activity,” relying on natural light that, in the words of Georges Bataille, “gives energy without demanding payback.”¹⁸² Sure, many advocates of modernity and scientific progress in the late parts of the 19th century mobilized artificial light to “conquer the dark, disenchant the night, and create new media and art,”¹⁸³ and eventually succeeded. Nonetheless, the “primitive” cinema of the Lumière brothers and Kříženecký proves that Bazin’s idea of indexicality, tied to the notion of light-sensitive chemicals as mediators between an object and its depiction, may be better off with the sun. Even in their digitized form, static marks are a powerful reminder of this unplugged indexicality, particularly resonant in an age when the ecological impact of filmmaking becomes more pressing than ever.¹⁸⁴

Casual spectators may not even notice static marks, cinephiles and theorists may perceive them as instances of Barthesian “punctum.”¹⁸⁵ However, they may also serve as models for film technology’s struggle to capture the ephemeral reality with as much detail as possible

¹⁸² Nadia Bozak, *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 33.

¹⁸³ Noam M. Elcott, *Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History of Modern Art and Media* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 4.

¹⁸⁴ Laura U. Marks, “Let’s Deal with the Carbon Footprint of Streaming Media,” *Afterimage* 47, no. 2 (2020), 46–52.

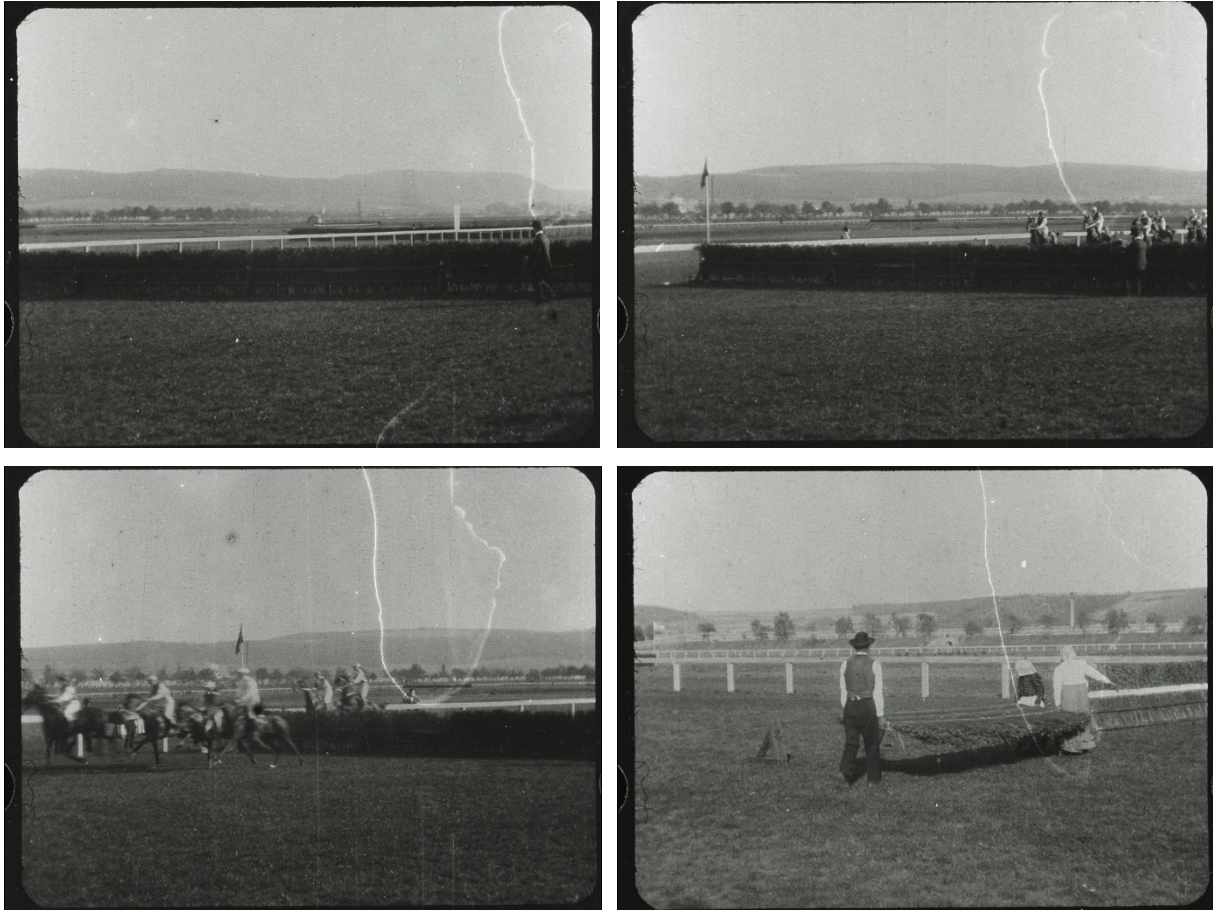
¹⁸⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

while disclosing its entanglement in this same reality. With regards to indexicality, they bring both limits and benefits of the mummified change to the foreground. On the one hand, static marks illustrate what happens when the cinematographic event captures more of the reality than originally intended. It may cause that the figures which were meant to be filmed become contaminated with other shapes, and subsequently lose their privileged position in the profilmic reality. On the other hand, the variable presence of the marks, or even their interference with the figurative content, indicates that the cinematographic event might involve significant processes that cannot be limited to the mimetic representation of visible objects. It signals that the camera has captured more than meets the human eye, and therefore creates a more diffused reality, spread among a multitude of distinctive actors. Rather than unraveling this mutual entanglement, we should embrace it and see what it can do when confronted with a specific figurative formation – notably that of the racing horses themselves.

2.4. Horse Racers Struck by Lightning

It is not known how static marks were perceived in the Czech lands, or specifically in the films of Jan Kříženecký. Throughout his short and fragmented filmmaking career, Kříženecký was entirely dependent on film material bought from abroad, concretely from the Lumière brothers. As a filmmaker from a small nation who did not even have the privilege to be a classified Lumière operator, his access to film material was severely limited; therefore, he presumably could not have afforded to manipulate with the static marks in any significant way. Nevertheless, at least we know that the marks were preserved in the surviving nitrate materials and continue to be visible in the digitized films. Similar to the digitally restored Lumière films, they appear in several forms. For example, *Exhibition Sausage Seller and Bill-Poster* (Výstavní párkař a lepič plakátů; 1898, source: original negative) contains extensive tree-branch-like shapes which at certain moments cover the entire image; in *Old Town Firemen* (Staroměstští hasiči; 1898, source: original negative), the marks look alike, but they are visible only on the left side of the frame. *Spring Races* represent probably the most specific case, for two reasons. First, the electric bolts appear more isolated – instead of convoluted threads, there are usually only one or two lines – yet they seem all the more visible in the images, due to the bright background and sharpness of the white streaks. Second, they come to the fore during the racing sequence (ca. between 02:00 and 02:30, usually on the right side of the frame), in a way that transcends the boundary between figuration and materiality and establishes provisional contact. The way horses and jockeys,

and, to a lesser extent, the photographer trying to take pictures and the ladies working on the hurdles, seem to be struck by lightning intrigues one to find a more speculative dimension of the indexical encounter.



Figures 2.5–2.8: *The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague* (První den jarních dostihů pražských; Jan Kříženecký, 1908, source: original negative) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

In many ways, the presence of static marks within the horse-racing microcosm reflects the fantasy of showing AND disciplining contingencies of the visible world, manifest in the endeavors of cinematic precursors and early practitioners, from Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey to the Lumière brothers and Kříženecký.¹⁸⁶ Unlike Muybridge's and Marey's scientific exercises,¹⁸⁷ movements of the galloping horses are not subordinated to isolation and fragmentation but shaped in their natural environment. They are shown within a recognizable reality that is in constant flux, without discernible phases or gaps, diffusing our

¹⁸⁶ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹⁸⁷ I am referring to Muybridge's famous study of horses in motion *Sallie Gardner at the Gallop* (1878) and Marey's numerous chronophotographic images of horse trotting and galloping.

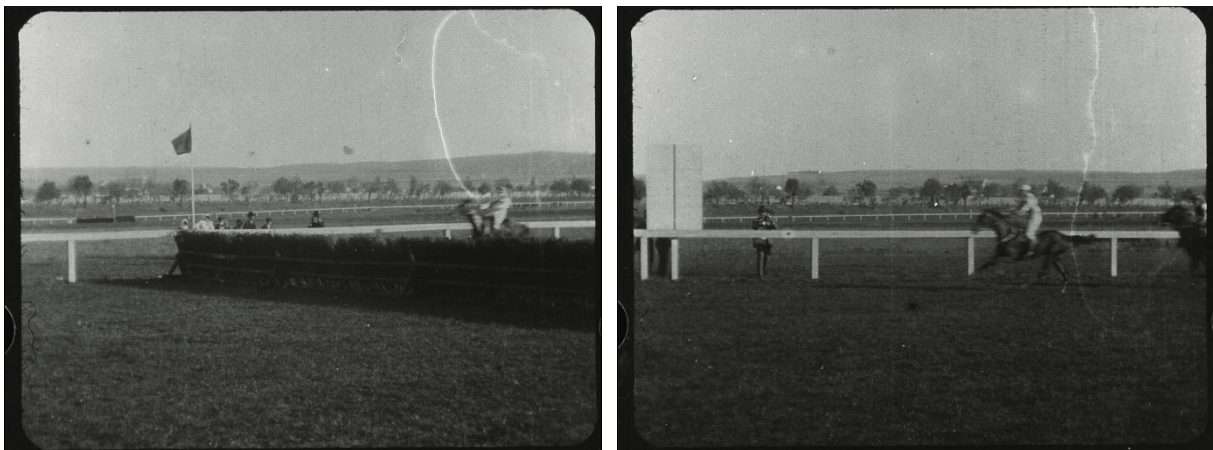
attention among diverse figurative and material phenomena. Thanks to the now entirely portable camera with a viewfinder, the horses can be followed throughout their trajectory, the rudimentary editing possibilities push their actions further towards narrativity. And yet, both liberating and constricting forces entailed within this fascination with the real come to a halt when facing the physical, seemingly unworldly gestures of fleeting electricity. These intrusions remind us that the newly championed contingency reaches beyond the actual accidents caused by the pro-filmic reality. It starts to invite accidents that stem from things that were supposed to be extracted from that reality. The crack-up that emerges denies any possibility of figuration outside the event that gives it birth – an event that is, all in all, co-realized by untamed technological actors.

Such an intrusive appearance of electricity creates a paradox that reminds us of the role technological accidents play in the photographic representation of reality as well as in the figurative content of the image. As already mentioned, static electricity was deemed disturbing in its period due to its unpredictability and uncontainability. Even those who championed contingent reality considered it a threat, a chaotic, alien force whose intrusion risks the integrity of the represented reality. In *Spring Races*, the lightning bolts signal a reality that is simultaneously artificial, tied to the unique construction of the Cinématographe, and natural, stemming from its envelopment in the lived world. The traces of galloping horses and their riders are visibly there, but devoid of their exclusive right to be represented, while the apparatus loses its privilege to remain anonymous. From this perspective, static electricity seems like “the natural force of artifice and the artificial force of nature at the same time,” as Jacques Rancière would say.¹⁸⁸ On one level, electricity invades the pro-filmic reality with lightning streaks that seem out of place, setting the contours of the human world temporarily ablaze; on the other, as the digitization makes us see even clearer, this electricity constitutes an immanent potentiality of a universe that makes the forms emerge in the first place.

Thus, we can perceive static electricity as a force that mediates the relation between the camera, the filmed figures and objects, and their representation, and consequently broadens our notion of cinematic reality and indexicality. Not only does Kříženecký’s film confirm the objectivist dimension of Bazin’s ontology, with the primacy of a nonliving agent that intervenes between the originating object and its reproduction. The static marks present a

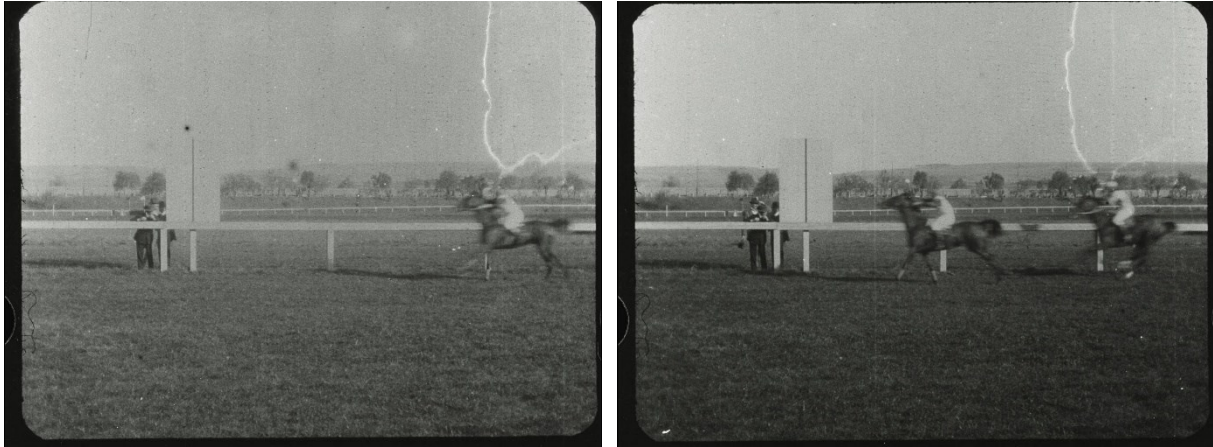
¹⁸⁸ Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 104.

distinctive actor, that surplus which enhances reality with its underlying technological dimension, and also evokes what the film's figurative content owes to the event of its own making. Yet, as tempting as it would be to see this as a step towards an object-oriented film theory, with Bazin as its precursor, we should listen to Luka Arsenjuk's reservations about such endeavor. He claims that "contrary to OOP [object-oriented philosophy]'s sharp metaphysical distinctions, film theory has always depended on its ability to establish the (moving) image in terms of a dialectic (rather than sheer unmediated separation) of being and appearance, of reality and sensuousness, of the object and its representation."¹⁸⁹ He argues that despite his "object-oriented" account of cinematic ontology, Bazin is "well aware of the paradox of the image: even the filmmakers who place their 'faith in reality' must find a way to work with appearances. They must invent something like a nonmanipulative manipulation of sensuous relations and representations of reality capable of revealing to the spectator the new sense of reality's being."¹⁹⁰ In other words, Bazin's idea of realism has an intrinsic tie to the activity of material and technological actors, but only as long as they are grounded within a perceptually recognizable, artistically shaped reality. As an early film that marries a pre-documentary, fly-on-the-wall approach with rudimentary technological means of the unplugged cinematographic apparatus, *Spring Races* underlines this paradox, leaving room for both figurative and material reality, as well as for their diverse traces and deixes.



¹⁸⁹ Luka Arsenjuk, "On the Impossibility of Object Oriented Film Theory," *Discourse* 38, no. 2 (2016), 206.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*



Figures 2.9–2.12: *The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague* (První den jarních dostihů pražských; Jan Kříženecký, 1908, source: original negative) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

The intermingling of these realities and processes can be even more visible when confronted with specific frames in which the lightning bolts hit the horse racers. Leaving aside factors such as framing, tracking shots, or staging in depth, or, from the other end, the speed of hand-cranking, the visibility of static marks in Figures 2.9–2.12 is highlighted because the content invites it. The galloping horses' movement is so frenetic that seeing it frame by frame in editing software inevitably causes the racers to turn blurry, and therefore more vulnerable towards the deformative forces of filmic matter. As continuous as the horses' movement seems, the blurred figures demonstrate that even this continuity has its limits. However, the frame-by-frame investigation may also reinvent these constraints as windows onto an altogether different sphere of the contingent reality, and, consequently, a different notion of movement.

Film theory has generally linked blur to low-definition quality, to the fact that “inappropriate” conditions of recording, storing, and screening can significantly tamper with our ideas of order and clarity. For example, Asbjørn Grønstad champions blurry low-resolution practices as a challenge against transparency, immediacy, and sharpness in contemporary art.¹⁹¹ According to him, low-definition images “function like tropes, in that they make visible, and italicize, the inherent opacity of all images,”¹⁹² their “constitutive thickness” akin to “a kind

¹⁹¹ Asbjørn Grønstad, *Rethinking Art and Visual Culture: The Poetics of Opacity* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). For the recent discourse on blurry images, see: Martine Beugnet, Allan Cameron, and Arild Fetveit, eds., *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); Beugnet, Martine and Richard Misek, “In Praise of Blur,” *[in]Transition: Journal for Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies* 4, no. 2b (2017), accessed July 31, 2021, <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/2017/07/11/praise-blur>.

¹⁹² Grønstad, *Rethinking Art and Visual Culture*, 48.

of semiotic crust whose inevitable presence always makes the content of the image generative rather than reflective.”¹⁹³ Nonetheless, in the digitized original negative of *Spring Races*, the sharpness of the images scanned in 4K does not erase this thickness but enriches it. Considering there is such a moment when the galloping stops being divisible and measurable on screen, a blurred focus may be an appropriate expression of a dynamic movement that is no longer tied to individual figures and enters into a flux of material beings – as Sergei Eisenstein would say, first the movement, and then what moves.¹⁹⁴ The represented reality turns into a rhythmic interplay of deictic forces, oscillating between the blurry figures and the sharp white streaks on an immanent plane, and thereby it is revealed as composed of small, loosely assembled particles of light. Gilles Deleuze offers a nice generalization of this principle: “visibilities are not forms of objects, nor even forms that would show up under light, but rather forms of luminosity which are created by the light itself and allow a thing or object to exist only as a flash, sparkle or shimmer.”¹⁹⁵ In other words, the distorted figures and the lightning bolts would be just particular instances of a universal luminosity that structures the moving image and, by extension, the whole reality.

Still, the way in which the static marks concretely engage with the blurry horses guarantees that this interplay does not delve too far into abstraction. Without a trace left in the form of a figure, both these vectors of movement would vanish in an indistinguishable noise of light particles. As Jacques Aumont comments, the most interesting intrusions of natural or artificial light into the image are those that “do not occult it absolutely,” and rather “hover on it, as if hesitating to be a part of it.”¹⁹⁶ To remain discernible, even in its blurred form, static electricity needs to fluctuate between the traces of reality through which it passes and the deictic gestures which signal its invasion into alien territory. This way, its role in underscoring the entanglement between the figurative world and its material-technological underpinnings, as well as between the two major functions of indexicality, can resonate with the spectator.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹⁴ Luka Arsenjuk, *Movement, Action, Image, Montage: Sergei Eisenstein and the Cinema in Crisis* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2018), 26.

¹⁹⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 45. See also: Hanjo Beressem, “Local Color: Light in Faulkner,” in *Media|Matter: The Materiality of Media|Matter as Medium*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 69–95.

¹⁹⁶ Jacques Aumont, “The Veiled Image: The Luminous Formless,” in *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty*, eds. Martine Beugnet, Allan Cameron, and Arild Fetveit (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 30.

2.5. Coda: In Praise of Impure Reality

The encounter of pro-filmic reality with static electricity reflects how close the worlds of figuration and materiality can really be. Not only does the presence of technological actors in the image distort our view of the represented events – they also enrich our awareness of how many various phenomena the events initially entailed. Electricity emerges as a force that disturbs the formation of a coherent diegetic reality but also as a constitutive factor that co-determines the film’s coming into being. Seeing the marks of this encounter in the digitized artifacts reminds us that however many layers of technological transformation and external damages accumulate in the moving image, the indexical reality in all of its meanings finds a way to make itself visible.

In *The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague*, the quadruple logic of indexicality – expressed by the interrelated doubles of figuration and materiality, and trace and deixis – has found a miniature yet condensed manifestation. The static marks arise within a recognizable fictional world with distinctive figures and realist framing, which makes them less pronounced than, for example, the yellowish-orange layer in *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge* (Chapter 1) but also more specifically directed. The frames with electric horses in particular show how far can deixis go with regards to the aesthetic meaning of the scene and the whole event without drowning the images in nothingness. In this endeavor, it clearly belongs to a family of other films with a Lumière signature mark, yet the sharp, individuated white streaks targeted at the horse racers affect the form and content of the images to such an extent that the scene can be perceived as a specific (if not entirely unique) variation of this phenomenon.

What changes can the electric horses undergo in its newly acquired digital form? The digitization in 4K may distance the images from the immediate contact with the light that “existed, right then and there, at the moment the photograph was taken.”¹⁹⁷ However, it also allows us to bracket the scenes in which lightning bolts instigate a crack-up and experiment with how they can alter our notion of what the surface of film is and can be. An inspiration can come from Sami van Ingen’s short found footage film *Flame* (Polte, 2018). This work, based on damaged frames from the only remaining nitrate reel of a lost Finnish melodrama

¹⁹⁷ Bozak, *The Cinematic Footprint*, 19.

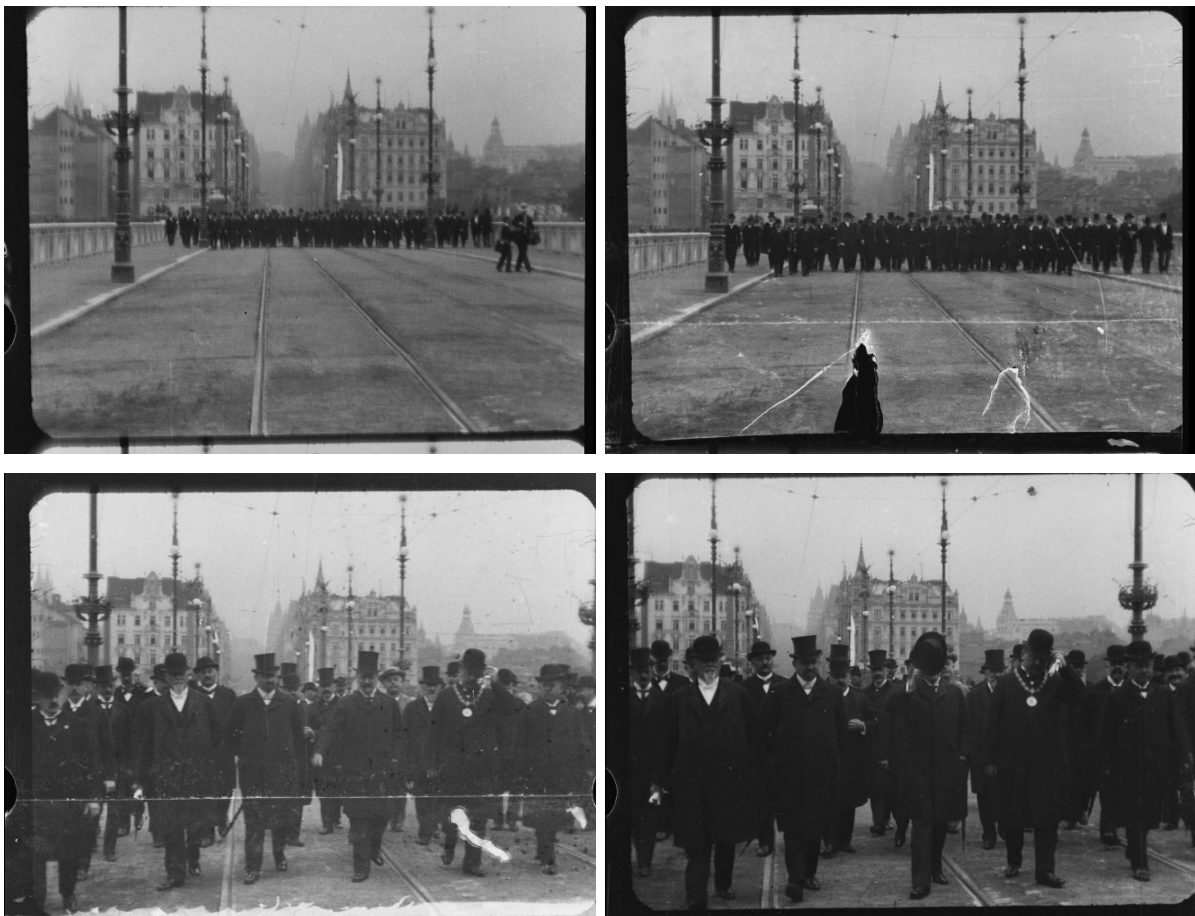
from the 1930s,¹⁹⁸ bears many resemblances with the films of Bill Morrison, particularly in the way it lets the signs of decay communicate with the diegetic action in slow motion. However, van Ingen's approach is more interventionist, experimenting with the newly acquired puzzle-like structure of the film as a digital file. The author treats the deformations like masses of pixels, disassembling and reassembling them across the frames and using the editing software as a divining rod that searches for places where it could generate the biggest amount of energy, the most developed crack-up. If we applied this tactic to Kříženecký's *Spring Races*, we could investigate the complex web of figurative and material agents, traces and deixes, in which the quadruple logic of indexicality becomes truly visible and meaningful. In this manner, the digital technology may become something more than either an empty shell or an eraser/retoucher – a full-fledged actor in investigating how many notions of the index even a single frame is capable of containing.

¹⁹⁸ The film is *Fallen Asleep When Young* (Silja; Teuvo Tulio, 1937). All screening prints and the negative of the film were destroyed in a 1959 studio fire. A sequence from the middle of the film was found at La Cinémathèque française in Paris in 2015. Sami van Ingen, "Flame," Vimeo, 2018, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/flamefilm>.

3. Trembling Meaning

Opening Ceremony, Camera Instability, and Transduction in Archival Moving Images

June 6, 1908. The opening ceremony of the Čech Bridge in Prague. A group of local bureaucrats, all dressed in black and neatly arranged into rows, is ready to make the first walk across the bridge. The Lumière Cinématographe, operated by Jan Kříženecký, waits on the other end. The goal is to capture the parade with as much precision and as much grandeur as possible. However, as the figures are slowly approaching the apparatus, the camera starts trembling, both horizontally and vertically, transforming the distinguished, fine-hatted gentlemen into a vibrating mass of black, barely differentiable shapes. In the end, the threat of the fourth wall collapsing does not result solely from the content and composition of the image – the Cinématographe device amplifies the effect and makes it all the more aesthetically generative.



Figures 3.1–3.4: *Opening Ceremony of the Čech Bridge* (Slavnost otevření nového Čechova mostu; Jan Kříženecký, 1908, source: original negative) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

This captivating yet oddly disturbing scene comes from Kříženecký's short actuality *Opening Ceremony of the Čech Bridge (Slavnost otevření nového Čechova mostu, 1908)*, or, more precisely, from what we are allowed to see of the film 112 years after its creation, in the form of a high-resolution video that was digitized from the original negative. Alternatively, we can at least watch the specific fragment in a condensed GIF format that demonstrates the motion of trembling in a way the film stills above cannot.¹⁹⁹ In this moment, the crack-up, albeit for a little while, functions like a well-oiled machine, connecting two notions of trembling, and, by extension, two distinctive worlds – the world of representation and figuration and the world of matter and technology – into an automatized system of making meaning. Even within Kříženecký's body of work, such moments are quite rare. The uncannily well-timed translation of material trembling into the figurative one postulates a notion of the crack-up that not only mediates the encounter between the figurative and material dimensions but also synchronizes them to pursue a specific meaning. How do the raw, tectonic rupture of the color layer in *Grand Consecration* or the invasion of lightning streaks in *Spring Races* turn into a regulative mechanism between seemingly separated spheres of signification?

The bridge scene presents a case in point of a non-interventionist approach to digitization, preserving the dispositions of the camera obtained from the Lumière brothers (a Cinématographe-type). Due to the fact that the images were left trembling rather than being corrected and stabilized, the film can shake our own ideas of how aesthetic effects may emerge. It creates an impression that the trembling is an after-effect – the moment when the quivering of the apparatus translates into the quivering of the figures approaching the screen (and vice versa) seems as if it has been set up, amplified, or even added artificially by a later filmmaker who appropriated these images. Indeed, there are many found footage filmmakers who might utilize such image instability for artistic ends. In other words, they would use the trembling of the camera to pull the figurative image out of joint, in order to highlight the extent to which its form and content depend on their material-technological underpinnings and investigate, in the words of found footage filmmaker Peter Tscherkassky, the possibilities of “walk[ing] the line between figuration and abstraction.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Retrieved from: <https://gfycat.com/mealydistantduckbillcat>. A shorter version is available here: <https://gfycat.com/badseparatebluetickcoonhound>.

²⁰⁰ Alejandro Bachmann, “The Trace of Walk That Has Taken Place – A Conversation with Peter Tscherkassky,” *Found Footage Magazine* 4, no. 4 (2018), 30.

However, an archivist or historian of film technology would (rightly) surmise that the trembling reflects the original disposition of the Lumière *Cinématographe*, which was infamous for its horizontal and vertical instability,²⁰¹ or, more generally, the instability inherent to most cinematographic apparatuses of that period.²⁰² The trembling would be assessed as something that pertained to the early cinematic experience, but not as a desirable or aesthetically pleasing element – rather as a disturbance waiting to be overcome, operating on an altogether different plane of existence, oblivious to the specific content of the image. Although there were very specific audiences that found a certain poetry in the trembling,²⁰³ the idea of acknowledging its aesthetic appeal or even exploiting it for artistic purposes was not generally deemed plausible. In the case of digitizing or restoring such quivering images, the decision whether or not to stabilize them (or to what degree) would be more guided by a respect for their historical context or by a desire to make them more accessible to the contemporary public, rather than by any presumed aesthetic intention.

Yet, neither of these interpretations by themselves account for the unintentional aesthetic meaning that arises out of the interaction between the gentlemen walking on the bridge and the unstable Lumière camera. Particularly the way the shaking of the apparatus intensifies and escalates just as the figures are approaching the camera presents a fascinating exercise in accidental aesthetics that, even for an archival/found footage aficionado, holds many surprises. There are many experimental found footage films that employ image instability for (de)formative ends, and even more archival films where camera trembling subtly or abruptly infiltrates figuration, but significantly rarer to encounter are film moments in which the instability resonates with the diegetic action to such an extent – and when they do emerge every once in a while, we lack proper conceptual instruments to describe and analyze them.

This leads to a key question which the present chapter addresses: What happens when two heterogeneous spheres – the figurative one (the gentlemen crossing the bridge and the formal composition of the scene) and the material one (the Lumière camera and its fluctuating film feeding mechanism) – cooperate towards a specific aesthetic meaning without any prior intention or expectation? Would this multiplicity of figurative and material elements be

²⁰¹ Laurent Mannoni, “Les Appareils cinématographiques Lumière,” *1895*, no. 82 (2017), 52–88; Jeanne Pommeau and Jiří Anger, “The Digitization of Jan Kříženecký’s Films,” *Illuminace* 31, no. 1 (2019), 105.

²⁰² Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: A Guide to Study, Research and Curatorship* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 63–66.

²⁰³ Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 88–89.

reconcilable with some form of stability or equilibrium? And how could such moments be perceived as more than mere deviations or bits of comic relief, and further pursued for aesthetic or scholarly ends?

To answer these questions, the archival and artistic perspectives need to join forces with film theory and, by extension, with film philosophy. While contemporary film and media theory offers tools to scrutinize the role of technology and filmic matter (analog or digital) in creating aesthetic effects, the paradoxical marriage of instability and equilibrium in *Opening Ceremony* is so abstract (in its ontological groundlessness) AND so concrete (in its relative aesthetic uniqueness) that it demands a gift from philosophy. Therein lies the importance of Gilbert Simondon, whose ontogenetic philosophy of technology is becoming increasingly relevant in film studies, especially in the research of film technology.²⁰⁴ His line of thinking enables us to conceive of the dialectic between specificity and hybridity in archival/found footage as not necessarily dependent on an intervention of external actors – whether by artistic manipulation or temporal degradation – but as possibly emanating from an auto-regulative mechanism of the archival moving image itself. In the words of Adrian Mackenzie, “what was thought to be merely added on to something more primary turns out to be irreversibly and inextricably presupposed in the constitution of what is said to be added on to.”²⁰⁵ The concept of transduction offers a means to illustrate how this mechanism operates and persists, due to its ability to bring diverse elements together as well as its capacity for keeping these elements in balance.

For this purpose, I employ Simondon’s concept of “transduction” that was developed by Gilbert Simondon in his philosophy of technology and individuation.²⁰⁶ The importance of this term lies precisely in its double logic of multiplicity and stability. On the one hand, it designates a process which resides in the intersection and knotting together of diverse realities within a domain, a process that highlights the transitionality and transversality lurking behind the individuation of all living and non-living entities. On the other hand, it also stresses the necessity of balance (however provisional) – although the intermingling of different spheres

²⁰⁴ Francois Albera and Maria Tortajada, eds., *Cinema Beyond Film: Media Epistemology in the Modern Era* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010); Benoît Turquety, *Inventing Cinema: Machines, Gestures and Media History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019); Benoît Turquety, *Medium, Format, Configuration: The Displacements of Film* (Lüneburg: meson press, 2019).

²⁰⁵ Adrian Mackenzie, *Transductions: Bodies and Machines at Speed* (London: Continuum, 2002), 7.

²⁰⁶ Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2017); Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

within a system introduces chaos, this chaos has its own way of achieving “metastability,” a temporary state in which the potentialities hidden in the diverse realities are kept in mutual tension without being actualized. Therefore, transduction allows us to conceptualize not only a processual encounter between heterogeneous actors but also the ability of this encounter to sustain without any of the actors withdrawing or eliminating the other. As a concept resonant with the ethos that gave birth to the Deleuzian crack-up,²⁰⁷ transduction can serve as a supporting mechanism that helps the crack-up between figuration and materiality reach a temporary equilibrium. Moreover, in the particular case of unintentional trembling in *Opening Ceremony*, where the meaning is not pre-orchestrated by an artist and must be actively sought out, the concept can also explain the role of the human (scholarly) operator, who isolates and examines the subtle interchanges between figuration and materiality in microscopic detail.

The argument for the connection between Simondon’s notion of transduction and the trembling in *Opening Ceremony* shall progress in three stages. First, I demonstrate the relevance of transduction for understanding the relationship between figuration and materiality as partly independent from external intervention and capable of staging and regulating their mutual entanglement and differentiation in archival moving images. Second, I examine the usefulness of the concept when applied to various examples of image instability, as a phenomenon that brings the figurative and material spheres together, in experimental found footage. Third, I return to the case of *Opening Ceremony* in order to show how transduction can emerge and operate without artistic intervention, by means of nothing more than the isolation, repetition, and slow observation of the trembling moment frame by frame (or, more precisely, between the frames).

In general, this exercise puts forward the notion that even the most abstract philosophical concept can find its manifestation in the most inconspicuous detail of film form and matter, and that despite its chaotic character, the crack-up may occasionally reach a surprising level of perfection by itself. In the spirit of Gilles Deleuze – who was notoriously inspired by Simondon’s thought²⁰⁸ – rather than thinking about *Opening Ceremony* in terms of

²⁰⁷ For a specific Deleuzian interpretation and application of transduction, see: Audronė Žukauskaitė, “Deleuze, Simondon, and Beckett: From Being to Becoming,” in *The Dark Precursor: Deleuze and Artistic Research*, eds. Paulo de Assis and Paulo Guidici (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017), 272–278.

²⁰⁸ Deleuze’s philosophy was highly influenced by Simondon, particularly by his notion of individuation which helped him articulate his theory of differentiation and actualization. For treatments of the Deleuze-Simondon relation, see, for example: Emmanuel Alloa and Judith Michalet, “Differences in Becoming: Gilbert Simondon and Gilles Deleuze on Individuation,” *Philosophy Today* 61, no. 3 (2017), 475–502.

transduction, the aim is to think transduction “with” the film.²⁰⁹ Its relatively unique variation on the aesthetic possibilities of camera trembling reimagines the problem of transduction from below, through the perspective of a technological accident, and thereby introduces the relevance of the concept and allows its application toward a more practical film theory.

3.1. Transduction as a Mechanism of Distribution and (Meta)stability

Throughout his works, Simondon defines transduction in numerous ways,²¹⁰ but always with the same general principle in mind. Instead of imagining reality as composed of pre-existent substance, stable identities, and binary oppositions, he portrays reality as inherently processual, as something that is in constant flux. Transduction consists in “following being in its genesis, in carrying out the genesis of thought at the same time as the genesis of the object.”²¹¹ Simondon’s ontogenetic rather than ontological account of the world manifests itself in a new notion of man’s relation to technology. He opposes the common view which understands technology and nature as separate entities, or, more precisely, which sees technical objects as mere tools that are designed to manipulate nature. Instead, technology (or technicity) is conceived as a mode of “being in the world” that can only exist as a continually evolving network of relations – not only between different tools and machines but also between machines and their elements, between machines and their associated milieu, and between machines and the human beings who use them.²¹² Transduction plays a key role in the processes by which both humans and technical objects are becoming “individuated,” meaning they are never given in advance but are continuously produced.²¹³ It enables individuation to be both relational and distributive, in that individuation always happens in the interface between two or more different realities, and is paradoxically stable, in a sense that it maintains an immanent distribution of potential energy between the diverse spheres. In a nutshell, transduction is the invisible glue that holds a multiplicity of potentially individuating

²⁰⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989), 280; Bernd Herzogenrath, “Toward a Practical Aesthetics: Thinking With,” in *Practical Aesthetics*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 1–24.

²¹⁰ See, for example: Adrian Mackenzie, “Transduction: invention, innovation and collective life,” Unpublished manuscript, 2003, accessed July 31, 2021, <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/mackenza/papers/transduction.pdf>; Muriel Combes, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 6–9; Paulo de Assis, “Gilbert Simondon’s ‘Transduction’ as Radical Immanence in Performance,” *Performance Philosophy* 3, no. 3 (2017), 695–716.

²¹¹ Gilbert Simondon, “The Position of the Problem of Ontogenesis,” *Parrhesia*, no. 7 (2009), 4–16.

²¹² Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*.

²¹³ Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*.

processes together, without erasing the differences between them and without denying that the whole system is non-coincident with itself.

More specifically, Adrian Mackenzie demonstrates how transduction manages to bring together phenomena that are usually seen as contradictory. It shows us how “conceptually opposed terms such as form and matter can be seen as abstract husks of the transductive interactions from which they derive.”²¹⁴ Mackenzie refers to Simondon’s example of making a brick – what we perceive as an imposition of a “parallelepiped” form on a raw clay, involves “linking realities of heterogeneous domains.”²¹⁵ The capacity of the material to be molded is itself the outcome of a “series of transformative operations”, and the resulting shape comes from a “state of internal resonance in the mass of clay” by which the mold “limits and stabilizes” matter: rather than creating forms, it “gives an end to the deformation.”²¹⁶ Thus, rather than a linear progression from two isolated materials towards a finished product, we have a set of complicated mediations and interactions, which in this case culminate in matter-taking-form, but do not always necessarily have to do so.

If we imagine the figurative space in *Opening Ceremony* as form and the apparatus as matter, we can discern a similar yet not so finalized process in the trembling moment of the bridge scene. From a strictly Simondonian perspective, it would also make sense to conceive of the figures, the bridge, and the camera as an assemblage of material actors from which form emerges through a process of transduction, which brings the assemblage together in the moment of filming and transforms the potential energy into an actual one.²¹⁷ However, this approach would struggle to account for the presupposed hierarchy between the figurative and material spheres in the film’s meaning-making process, which is overcome only by means of an accident. Thus, while describing transduction in *Opening Ceremony*, the emerging assemblage of figurative and material elements should be thought of in relation to the pre-existing crack between the two dimensions – even though they finally interact and operate towards the same aesthetic goal, the material level becomes visible (and meaningful) only through a perceived failure. For these reasons, the distribution of components in the scene is more fragile and reversible than in Simondon’s and Mackenzie’s examples, but as we will see later, it can be all the more aesthetically generative for it.

²¹⁴ Mackenzie, *Transductions*, 46.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 47.

²¹⁷ Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, 155.

Besides its capacity for transversal distribution, transduction also offers a certain degree of regulation and stability. One of the definitions Simondon provides for transduction is “a regulative function in all machines with a margin of localized indeterminacy in their functioning.”²¹⁸ In its mediation between different spheres, each with their specific energetic potentials, it also has to find at least a temporary way to keep one group of elements from actualizing at the expense of erasing the other. To keep this from happening, transduction presupposes a “metastable” state, a “provisional equilibrium established when a system rich in potential differences resolves inherent incompatibilities by restructuring itself topologically and temporally.”²¹⁹ In other words, metastability involves a plurality of latent energetic potentials, whose interaction does not end in one thing becoming another, but still keeps going, maintaining an elementary form of the incompatibility and irreducibility of their differences.²²⁰ This notion resonates with Jihoon Kim’s dialectic of specificity and hybridity described in previous chapters,²²¹ and it finds its particular variation in the bridge scene of *Opening Ceremony*: despite the chaotic eruption of the trembling apparatus that immediately translates into the trembling figures on the bridge, the image neither eliminates the figures nor does it efface the apparatus – at one brief moment they work together towards a single aesthetic effect.

What humans bring to these processes is giving the most distinguished shape to the “margin of indeterminacy.” This is the margin that “brings potential energy to its actualization,” that allows the technical object to be individuated and integrated into its milieu and to exchange information with other technical objects.²²² This aspect reveals a certain privileging of the human perspective which, due to the progressively autonomizing technical agency in the modern age, seems less and less tenable. Nevertheless, the primacy of the human element in transduction is not necessarily a given – for example, the hierarchy has been reconsidered by Shane Denson. In his book *Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface* (2014), which aptly focuses on situating media beneath the evolutionary split between the human and the technical, Denson understands transduction according to the principle of “distributed embodiment” rather than human embodiment. He speaks of a

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Mackenzie, *Transductions*, 103.

²²⁰ Combes, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual*, 3–6.

²²¹ See Introduction and Chapter 1.

²²² Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, 18, 156.

“transduction of materially intersecting entities, each with their own form of embodiment, their own manner of marking the boundary, embodying the membrane, between material flux and the emergent realm of discrete objects.”²²³ In other words, the role of transduction resides in navigating the transitions between entities across the human-technological spectrum, while also acknowledging the irreducibility and non-identity of these entities. The regulation of the margin of indeterminacy would thus be distributed between the human and the non-human as well, which grants us the possibility to see human intervention (including the artistic one) as potentially less authoritative and more subtle and relational.

To provisionally sum up, transduction is important for two main reasons. First, it is a principle that enables us to account for transmissions and transformations between two ontologically distinctive yet communicating dimensions within a system. Second, at the same time, it is a mechanism that still entails a certain degree of stability, holding these two spheres in balance, making their movements perceptible in their nuances, and not letting either of them actualize at the expense of the other. In this way, it allows us to conceptualize hybridity and specificity together and let the crack-up reach a high level of concretization.

The distinctive shaping of transduction through camera instability in archival and found footage film will now be analyzed from two interrelated perspectives. The first approach investigates the uses of camera trembling in the context of experimental found footage, where it often plays the role of highlighting the ongoing deformation of existing images to reveal potential energy within them, as well as to show the mutual implication of figuration and materiality. The cases of intentional transduction demonstrate that the image instability in *Opening Ceremony* can be seen as a supremely aesthetic phenomenon with a discernible afterlife in media art. The second approach entails a close reading of the bridge scene in *Opening Ceremony* itself, examining the images frame by frame, or, more specifically, between the frames, since the trembling becomes visible only through movement from one frame to another. This process of submitting the scene to a specific “slow observation” that “highlights operational and material shifts over time”²²⁴ allows us to track and guide the

²²³ Shane Denson, *Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface* (Berlin: Transcript Verlag, 2014), 328. See also: Shane Denson, *Discorrelated Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 21–22.

²²⁴ Denson, *Postnaturalism*, 331–332. Although Denson uses the term “slow observation” more in the vein of examination over a longer time period, the concept fits the idea of a slow-motion study as well.

margin of indeterminacy that keeps the tension between figurative and material elements from disappearing.

3.2. Image Instability – Technological Problem or Aesthetic Potentiality?

Camera instability was one of the defining features of the earliest cinema, and haunted cinema well into the 1910s. To quote Benoît Turquety, “the perception of trembling, in all its forms and variations – vibration, wavering, shaking – was foremost and fundamental. It was only through effort that the eye could overcome this pulsatile state and see something.”²²⁵ More specifically, Paolo Cherchi Usai mentions that the vertical shift of the image is, in its slight form, considered normal in all analog cinema, but “the phenomenon was often more pronounced and severely disruptive in the earliest years of cinema.”²²⁶ Cherchi Usai claims that jittery images were considered disturbing both by spectators and film producers,²²⁷ which leaves all restorers with a dilemma: should they “correct” a defect which was almost universally acknowledged as disruptive to the film experience, or remain faithful to the history of film technology?²²⁸ And even if they choose to preserve the trembling, is it even possible to maintain it in a digital medium which, again using Turquety’s words, lacks “movement in the machine?”²²⁹

Each of these approaches can have their merit under given circumstances, and while film archives tend to lean more towards historical authenticity, there are many degrees of stabilization which the digital restorer might opt for.²³⁰ In some cases, though, stabilization may significantly interfere with the figurative content of the image. David Francis gives an example of one restored print of Lumière’s *Boat Leaving the Port* (*Barque sortant du port*; 1895) which was “stabilised so effectively that you d[id]n’t see the rocking of the boat”²³¹ –

²²⁵ Turquety, *Inventing Cinema*, 241.

²²⁶ Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema*, 66.

²²⁷ Cherchi Usai mentions the example of one Italian production company, Itala-Film, which included the French word *fixité* in its trademark logo to signify that their projected images were rock-steady. Ibid.

²²⁸ Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction* (London: BFI, 2000), 60.

²²⁹ Turquety, *Inventing Cinema*, 243.

²³⁰ For example, the hotly debated digital restoration of the silent film *Beyond the Rocks* (Sam Wood, 1922), conducted by the EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, preserved some image instability, while also carrying out a minimal level of digital stabilization, “mainly due to the shrinkage of the nitrate print”. See Giovanna Fossati, “The Restoration of BEYOND THE ROCKS,” in *Work/s in Progress. Digital Film Restoration within Archives*, eds. Kerstin Parth, Oliver Hanley and Thomas Ballhausen (Vienna: SYNEMA, 2013), 111–120.

²³¹ Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis, Alexander Horwath and Michael Loebenstein, eds., *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace* (Wien: Synema – Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2008), 104.

and the most recent digital restoration of the film supervised by Thierry Frémaux and Bertrand Tavernier more or less follows suit.²³² Or, in an even more contemporary example, we can see in a segment from the ongoing digital restoration of D. W. Griffith's *The Stolen Jewels* (1908, nitrate print), conducted by Film Preservation Society within The Biograph Project, how the stabilization of a crowd scene eliminates the vertical trembling that amplified the represented chaos of the market place, and thus also the crack-up between figurative and material elements.²³³ If the decision of the archivist affects figuration to such an extent, it is debatable whether such a compromise, just to make the films more easily digestible by the public, is really worth it.

The figurative effects of image instability can also be exploited for aesthetic purposes. This endeavor has a strong tradition in experimental cinema – especially when working with early cinema as found footage.²³⁴ Of course, one cannot list all the reasons why found footage filmmakers turn to archival footage from the earliest cinema (though R. Bruce Elder offers an interesting list of six major reasons).²³⁵ However, there are quite a few films that exploit camera instability as a means to unravel the ontological tension between the figurative and material components of the moving image. Arguably the most famous (and extreme) example is the “aggressive passage”²³⁶ in Ken Jacobs's *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969), which is based on Billy Bitzer's eponymous film from 1905. According to P. Adams Sitney, in this extended section, the image jumps “in the projector gate to the point of indecipherability by vertical distortion,” making it difficult for anyone seeing the film at first glance to discern “if the projectionist has misthreaded or if what they are seeing is part of the film itself.”²³⁷ Even when the strategy is revealed as deliberate, there remains a lingering feeling that this vertical blur draws attention to the mysterious, unknowable quality of cinema in its most unrefined form – Elder even calls it a “surrealistic character.”²³⁸ In other words, the artistic

²³² Bertrand Tavernier and Thierry Frémaux, eds., *Lumière ! Le cinématographe 1895–1905* (DVD / Blu-ray, Lyon: Institut Lumière, 2015).

²³³ This paradox is highlighted by the video clip made from the scan, which still includes the edges and perforations of the frame that freely jump around while the image in the frame remains perfectly stable. <https://www.facebook.com/filmpreservationsociety/videos/621649468415755/>.

²³⁴ Bart Testa, *Back and Forth: Early Cinema and the Avant-Garde* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1992); Christa Blümlinger, “Lumière, the Train and the Avant-Garde,” in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 245–264.

²³⁵ R. Bruce Elder, “Bart Testa: Back and Forth: Early Cinema and the Avant-Garde [book review],” *Literary Review of Canada* 1 (X), X.

²³⁶ P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 344.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 344–345.

²³⁸ Elder, “Bart Testa.”

appropriation extracts a miniature of early cinema at its most chaotic and brackets it – not in order to tame the impulse, but rather to examine it under the microscope, to discover some sort of “equilibrium of disequilibrium”.

A different approach – more metaphoric, yet explicitly linked to the Lumière Cinématographe – is represented by Al Razutis’s film *Lumière’s Train, Arriving at the Station* (1979). Described by its author as an essay on “cinema itself” as “an apparatus of representation wherein fact and fiction are recreated,”²³⁹ this work reimagines the arrival of the train at La Ciotat Station in the legendary Lumière brothers’ film²⁴⁰ and other moments of alignment between train and cinema which followed it. The third section of the film depicts the iconic moment from the Lumière film, but the trajectory of the train, originally designed – similarly to the path of the crowd in *Opening Ceremony* – to break the fourth wall and “assault” the audience from within the depths of the *mise-en-scène*, no longer follows linear logic. Razutis’s artistic strategies – continuous alternation between positive and negative frames at varying speed, halting the locomotive at various phases of movement, shifting the machine from place to place – aim to unveil new potentialities within the mythical event. Crucially, the rapid montage of positive and negative images simulates the vertical and horizontal instability of the apparatus. In the first case, it sets the locomotive into motion even as it stands still; in the latter, it makes the elements surrounding the train disappear and re-emerge. The primal scene of film history is thereby not only confronted with its own technological underpinnings and its (de)figurative possibilities, but also with the de-centering power and energy embedded in the figure of the train itself, resulting in a curious multiplication of figurative and material elements that explodes in a sort of mechanistic spectacle.²⁴¹

What these two examples demonstrate is that image instability can be used as a powerful strategy for enacting the aesthetic potential of transduction within archival moving images. However, even if the trembling in those experimental films and in Kříženecký’s *Opening Ceremony* differ in degree rather than in kind, the distinction in ontological terms is still substantial. Whereas with found footage it is always more or less possible to attribute the clashes between figuration and materiality to the (at least partial) control of the appropriator

²³⁹ Al Razutis, “Lumière’s Train: Visual Essays No 1,” *Light Cone*, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://lightcone.org/en/film-1197-lumiere-s-train>.

²⁴⁰ *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (L’arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat; 1896).

²⁴¹ Mike Hoolboom, “Three Decades of Rage: An Interview with Al Razutis,” in *Al Razutis Iconoclast*, ed. Mike Hoolboom (2009, accessed July 31, 2021, <http://mikehoolboom.com/thenewsites/docs/601.pdf>), 63–64.

or the inevitable passing of time, there is no such safety net in *Opening Ceremony*. Also, found footage at least implicitly presupposes that there are meaningful ends to the process of overcoming the gap between the two spheres – but in the trembling bridge scene, such promise is clearly lacking. Transduction in Razutis’s and Jacobs’s films is intentionally orchestrated, amplified, and built up to the point of relative consistency, designed to regulate the margin of indeterminacy. In Kříženecký’s film, on the other hand, transduction remains volatile and prone to accidents. Even when it emerges and reaches such equilibrium as in the closing moments of the scene, there persists a permanent risk that the rudimentary auto-regulative mechanisms will give in to the forces that initially made the crack-up appear. When the figurative and material elements mingle by means of the distributed embodiment brought about by transduction, the pull towards abstraction becomes all too strong. The threat does not reside in the loss of form but in the excess of it – too many (de)figurative operations happen all at once, within a spatiotemporal unit that cannot contain them. However, there is something, a valve of sorts, that functions as a last resort against abstraction – and this can be observed and prolonged when looking frame by frame, or, in this case more precisely, between the frames.

If we want to differentiate the contours of transduction in the bridge scene, we must pay attention to how they take shape in the details of specific visual forms. To paraphrase Jihoon Kim, “it is on the level of their forms that the aspects of [...] hybridizations, including the simultaneous occurrences of their media components, become discernible.”²⁴² As camera instability in archival moving images orchestrates an interplay between figurative and material components, every single detail visible in-between the frames can be imbued with meaning.

3.3. Transduction Between the Frames

The meanings and effects that *Opening Ceremony* evokes are in essence straightforward. The crisp image of the digitized original negative allows us to clearly see the distinctive attributes that anchor the film in the actuality genre, as well as the popular formal features of the earliest cinema, such as frontal composition and staging in depth.²⁴³ At the same time, we can also

²⁴² Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital*, 35.

²⁴³ Thomas Elsaesser “Louis Lumière – the Cinema’s First Virtualist?,” in *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable? The Screen Arts in the Digital Age*, eds. Thomas Elsaesser and Kay Hoffmann (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1989), 45–64.

discern an attempt to break the fourth wall and “attack” the audience – a strategy that is in principle not dissimilar to period films in which a delegation of people walks straight towards the camera,²⁴⁴ or, by extension, to meta-fictional “experiments” such as *The Big Swallow* (James Williamson, 1901), in which a man, irritated by the presence of a photographer, devours the camera. Hence, the scene, while primarily invested in presenting the occasion of a significant monument being unveiled, also displays a predilection toward the disturbing experience of erasing the distance between us, the viewing subjects, and the filmed objects.

Nevertheless, the threat of the “menacingly approaching black wave” in *Opening Ceremony* that was mentioned by Czech writer Adolf Branald²⁴⁵ would hardly be thinkable without the trembling apparatus, whose horizontal and vertical instability escalates almost analogically with the characters approaching the camera. According to film restorer Jeanne Pommeau, instability was compensated during the digitization process “only when it occurred as a result of the film strip fluctuation in the scanner.”²⁴⁶ In order to not mask the instability that was created in the apparatus during the shooting, the perforations at the edges of the strips, and not the exposed or printed image, were used as reference points.²⁴⁷ As I have already pointed out, the higher-than-usual presence of not only vertical but also horizontal camera instability²⁴⁸ is primarily caused by two factors. First, due to the existence of just a single sprocket hole on each side of the frame (instead of the four holes used by Edison, which soon became standard), the film strip was less prone to remain steady. Second, the film feeding mechanism that was designed to move the film strip in the camera and keep it in place at the time of exposure was highly volatile.²⁴⁹ Add to this the many other types of instability that are hardly conceivable with digital technology, such as the sensibility of the crank drive to the physical

²⁴⁴ See, for example, the film *The Bey of Tunis and His Entourage Descend the Steps of the Bardo* (Le bey de Tunis et les personnages de sa suite descendant l’escalier du Bardo; 1903, filmed by the Lumière operator Alexandre Promio).

²⁴⁵ Adolf Branald, *My od filmu* (Praha: Mladá fronta, 1988), 196, 197.

²⁴⁶ In the case of some of the materials, there is also the instability created during the printing process. Whereas the horizontal and vertical shift of the camera that is visible in the digitised originals is quick and jittery and rarely disrupts the integrity of the frame, the instability caused by inappropriate printing tends to affect the image to such an extent that it starts to “jump” in-between the frames. See Pommeau and Anger, “The Digitization of Jan Kříženecký’s Films,” 107.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Besides *Opening Ceremony*, the camera instability is perfectly visible in some of the digitized original negatives: *Exercises with Indian Clubs by the Sokol of Malá Strana* (Cvičení s kužely Sokolů malostranských; 1898), *Exhibition Seller and Bill-Poster* (Výstavní párkař a lepič plakátů; 1898), or *Satan’s Railway Ride* (Satanova jízda po železnici; 1906). It is also present in some of the prints, such as *Coach Transport* (Kočárová doprava; 1908).

²⁴⁹ Pommeau and Anger, “The Digitization of Jan Kříženecký’s Films,” 105.

movement of the operator's arm²⁵⁰ or the ever-present flicker, and it is no wonder that one period Cinématographe notice warned users against the risk of “vibrations.”²⁵¹ The horrifying effect does therefore arise unequivocally, but in a strangely twisted manner, since it is achieved by the collaboration between two dimensions – the figurative and the material – that differ in kind. Transduction brings them together while at the same time highlighting them as distinctive producers of meaning.

We can imagine the function of transduction in the scene as follows. The figurative elements in *Opening Ceremony* – the freshly built bridge, the entourage of elaborately dressed men, and a panorama of Prague, as well as the frontal composition, the staging in depth, and the risk of breaking the fourth wall – and the material elements – the Lumière Cinématographe with its fluctuating feeding mechanism and single-perforated nitrate film stock – are two communicating regimes of energy. Once transduction loosens the borders between these two groups of elements (though it does not erase it), the trembling of the apparatus slowly extends into the trembling of the bridge, progressing to the point at which the figures and the camera threaten to cancel each other. Nonetheless, the figurative and material processes do not merge but paradoxically amplify one another. On the one hand, the horizontal and vertical quivering of the apparatus which temporarily turns the figures into a “black wave” almost beats the formal and representational elements at their own game. On the other, the reality presented on screen becomes increasingly technological, grounded in a “continuous and non-inert matter” which entangles human and non-human entities, both in space and in time. We could perceive this weird assemblage of figurative and material actors as an immanent space of mutual intermingling, but this would risk losing sight of the fact that it was enabled only by the prior (and unintentional) overcoming of the rupture between the two spheres. As there is no traceable artistic purpose that would guide this interplay and its reception by the audience, nothing guarantees that the mutual becoming would make the specific presence of all the individual actors meaningful in their own right. This is why a material intervention in the form of slow motion becomes appropriate for the crack-up to maintain itself.

The forming of transduction in the film must be treated with specific care. As a processual phenomenon, this transduction is perceptible only in movement (see the GIFs) – no matter

²⁵⁰ Turquety, *Inventing Cinema*, 237.

²⁵¹ Louis Lumière and Antoine Lumière, *Notice sur le Cinématographe* (Lyon: Société anonyme des plaques et papiers photographiques A. Lumière et ses fils, 1897), 19.

how blurry the characters become in the film, the individual frames still hold them in clear contours. The examiner must make do with noting the changing positions of the edges of the frames or swiftly clicking between the frames to gain at least an abstract idea of the horizontal and vertical shift. Regarding the image instability, it is not the single frame, but the movement from frame to frame, that is the basic unit of film. To paraphrase Sean Cubitt, the moments when one frame disappears and another one appears, “so that no single frame is ever complete enough for it to be recognized as the particular moment of origin,” are the building blocks of film.²⁵² Therefore, a certain degree of movement needs to be maintained, but with two crucial limitations. First, in order to capture the crucial moment of transduction, the movement must occur within the short interval between the mass swallowing the camera (and, by extension, the audience) and the return to a normal state. Second, to at least simulate the conditions of the “slow observation,” the movement needs to be slowed down almost to the point of freezing, thereby unveiling the temporality hidden between the frames. In this way, the interval is expanded, magnified, and revealed as potentially inexhaustible,²⁵³ and therefore we are able to witness the transductive equilibrium, and also the crack-up, distilled to its essence.



²⁵² Sean Cubitt, *Videography: Video Media as Art and Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993). See also: Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital*, 72.

²⁵³ Tom Gunning, “Interview with Ken Jacobs,” in *Films That Tell Time: A Ken Jacobs Retrospective* (New York: American Museum of the Moving Image, 1989), 29–62; Rebecca A Sheehan, *American Avant-Garde Cinema's Philosophy of the In-Between* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 14.



Figures 3.5–3.8: *Opening Ceremony of the Čech Bridge* (Slavnost otevření nového Čechova mostu; Jan Kříženecký, 1908, source: original negative) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

In accordance with Vivian Sobchack’s description of slow motion, watching the climax of the trembling bridge scene at a glacial tempo does not render the movement imperceptible but hyperbolizes it, “cuts to the quick,” and thus uncovers an interesting dialectic of speed and slowness, forestallment and action.²⁵⁴ Slow and fast can thus be regarded not as qualitatively opposed categories – especially when considered in the context of early cinema which notoriously lacked standard frame rate²⁵⁵ – but as relative powers of the single category of speed. Hence, our attention is drawn to how the figurative and material elements, devoid of spatiotemporal coordinates that kept them apart from each other, each pulsate according to their specific rhythms.²⁵⁶ Crucially, we can also track the transductive hybridization of characters and the apparatus as it is occurring and take note of the most minute details of the process, including those that are, in the words of Sobchack, not “for us.”²⁵⁷

For example, the vertical shaking grows to monstrous proportions, lending each step of the clumsily approaching gentlemen an otherworldly, larger-than-life significance. The horizontal shaking, previously overshadowed by the vertical one, disturbs the figures in a more subtle measure, with inconspicuous, neurotic tics moving from right to left and vice versa. The men in black, increasingly paralyzed by the emerging clash of material operations, lose their seeming privilege to dictate the speed level, and consequently to express meaning as well.

²⁵⁴ Vivian Sobchack, ““Cutting to the Quick”: Techne, Physis, and Poiesis and the Attractions of Slow Motion,” in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 338.

²⁵⁵ Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: A Guide*, 181–185.

²⁵⁶ Jiří Anger, “(Un)Frozen expressions: Melodramatic moment, affective interval, and the transformative powers of experimental cinema,” *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies* 8, no. 2 (2019), 40.

²⁵⁷ Sobchack, ““Cutting to the Quick,” 346.

The closer they are, the more their figurative outlines mutate into a blur; the more recognizable and individualized the crowd should be, the more it appears devoured by an inhuman black wave. To employ the words of Eugene Thacker, “the movement of such massing and aggregate forms is that of contagion and circulation, a passing-through, a passing-between, even, in an eschatological sense, a passing-beyond.”²⁵⁸ The equilibrium thus arises at the price of bifurcations that result from the distribution of the meaning-making process across the borderlands of ontologically distinct worlds.

How is it, then, that transduction can still keep going and the crack-up does not disappear? Although the slow-motion effect intensifies the spreading of all the elements across a single plane – albeit a fissured one –, the figures in black never diffuse entirely; they are caught in the process of being swallowed, but are never actually swallowed. The scene even ends on a “positive” note: for a brief moment, the image seems as if it were about to rectify itself. The shifting of the camera ebbs slightly, the characters regain their contours – one of them even takes his hat off – and the next scene starts. In order to salvage the equilibrium and the margin of indeterminacy, another intervention must occur. If we return to the examples of Jacobs’s and Razutis’s films, we see that their effect is so powerful because the moment of transduction is replayed over and over – in other words, the trembling of figurative and material elements does not end in a finite resolution, but repeats itself, always with a little variation. One experimental found footage film, Siegfried A. Fruhauf’s *La sortie* (1998), demonstrates this process in a composition markedly similar to *Opening Ceremony*. Based on the first film made by the Lumière brothers – *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon* (La Sortie de l’Usine Lumière à Lyon, 1895) – *La sortie* shows the workers marching relentlessly through factory corridors over and over again, moving from foreground to background and simultaneously from left to right and right to left in a loop without a hope of ever leaving the factory.²⁵⁹ What is particularly relevant: the horizontal and vertical quivering of the camera both mimics and amplifies their movement, highlighting their entrapment not only in the context of the frame, but also vis-à-vis the apparatus. In the trembling scene in *Opening Ceremony*, which stages transduction by itself, such prolongation is achievable through a much simpler form – for example, the animated GIFs that were created to make the

²⁵⁸ Eugene Thacker, *Tentacles Longer Than Night: Horror of Philosophy*, vol. 3 (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015), 54.

²⁵⁹ Nicole Brenez, ““Is This the Precise Way That Worlds are Reborn?” The Films of Siegfried A. Fruhauf,” in *Film Unframed: A History of Austrian Avant-Garde Cinema*, ed. Peter Tscherkassky (Wien: SYNEMA – Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2012), 276–285.

trembling perceptible for the readers of this chapter. Thus, the human actor becomes more of a curator that guides the energies and potentialities hidden within the material, rather than an artist who seems to create them anew.

With the scene slowed down and looped, the monstrous dissolution of the approaching figures into the black mass might be a step towards another individuation – less smooth, yet more adapted to the human-technological entanglement. Strangely similar to the first appearance of the monster’s flattened head with stitches and neck-bolts, in a close-up, in James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931), a usually transparent composition becomes a vehicle for the human-technological transition. Echoing Denson’s interpretation of this moment, the lack of resolution to the hybridization process makes the trembling of *Opening Ceremony* a “parable of anthropotechnical evolution,”²⁶⁰ taking place in a zone of indeterminacy between the embodiment of the shifting apparatus, the uncertain and recursive embodiment of the human figures, and the embodiment of the scholar who actively strives to make sense of their interactions. Transduction perceived and further enacted via slow observation ensures that both principal agents of this co-evolution remain distinguishable, and that the crack-up maintains its differential as well as relational function.

3.4. Coda: Towards a Transductive Film Scholarship

Having moved from the general problem of a diffused, yet self-organizing interaction between figurative and material elements within a system to an examination of specific contours of this interaction in archival moving images, the narrative arc of this chapter is now complete. It has been argued that transduction, as a principle that involves both transversal distribution and regulative metastability, is a mechanism with significant aesthetic potential. Its appearances in found footage practices – experimental (in the films of Ken Jacobs, Al Razutis, and Siegfried A. Fruhauf) as well as archival (in the films of Jan Kříženecký) – demonstrate that the tension between the figurative and material spheres (with neither of them prevailing) can generate paradoxes that highlight the co-implication of these usually separate dimensions and also the non-identity of the archival moving image with itself. The analysis of the bridge scene in *Opening Ceremony* also shows that the transductive equilibrium can emerge accidentally, independent of artistic intervention or the ravages of time, through the autonomous creativity of a trembling camera. The only things necessary for revealing this phenomenon are a

²⁶⁰ Denson, *Postnaturalism*, 393.

theoretically generative concept (transduction) and a slow observation of the details of the scene – pursued via slow-motion and looping – that regulates the margin of indeterminacy and allows the moment of transduction to endure. To paraphrase Eugenie Brinkema, this encounter stresses “how the form itself is surprising and speculative, the form which might not be already there but is produced and unfolded through active close reading.”²⁶¹

It is ironic – or perhaps not ironic at all if we think in terms of the Simondonian framework – that a thorough examination of these auto-regulative processes is still enabled by a human intervention, i.e., isolating a fragment of the scene and subjecting it to slow motion, as if transduction, even in its most independent phase, still needed help from the operator to become sensible. Only in this case, the operator is not the artist, nor even the archivist (despite being undoubtedly responsible for preserving and curating the instability), but the scholar. This shift opens 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 strive to translate the unique materiality of hybrid media art into a creative engagement with the moving images and sounds themselves. One fine example can be found in the work of Shane Denson himself: his videographic manifesto *The Algorithmic Nickelodeon* imagines a form of audiovisual criticism that would aim to reinvent our notion of subject-object relations. For this to happen, deformations of the image/object and displacements of the analyst/subject must take place simultaneously. Thus, Denson blurs, zooms, or slows down early films (including Lumière’s *The Arrival of a Train*) that have been imported into an editing program and then with the help of an EEG device tracks the resulting fluctuations in brain activity that occur in the midst of observing these images. In this way, he creates a sort of media-theoretical perpetuum mobile, designed for the constant investigation into what “cinema” means in the age of algorithms.²⁶² A similar approach could have the chance to discover numerous aesthetic and scholarly potentialities of autonomous transduction, as well as ways in which this process can be exploited by human imagination.

²⁶¹ 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), 69.

²⁶² Shane Denson, “The Algorithmic Nickelodeon,” *Medieninitiative*, June 22, 2019, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://medieninitiative.wordpress.com/2019/06/22/the-algorithmic-nickelodeon/>.

4. The Milestone That Never Happened

An Assigination in the Mill, the Scratched Kiss, and the Failed Beginning of Czech Cinema

July 3, 1898. The Czech Cinematograph pavilion introduces a novelty – a comedy scene from the Exhibition Grounds staged by Josef Šváb-Malostranský. The short film – An Assigination in the Mill – shows the “first Czech actor” unveiling the official Czech Cinematograph poster and then proceeds with a story of a failed date that escalates into a fight. However, what binds these two events together now is a glimpse of perceptual ambiguity – is it two characters in search of “the first kiss in Czech cinema” or just a scratched canvas of an abstract painting? What is predestined to be an archival milestone has been torn apart right from scratch...



Figures 4.1–4.4: *An Assigination in the Mill* (Dostaveníčko ve mlýnici; 1898, source: nitrate print) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

Since its first screening at the Exhibition of Architecture and Engineering, *An Assignment in the Mill* (Dostaveníčko ve mlýnici; 1898, source: vintage print) has been one of the signature films that marked the beginning of Czech cinema. It is associated with numerous pioneering achievements – the first fictional film, the first acting performance, the first shot of the Czech Cinematograph, and also the first kiss. Of course, film historians would (rightly) protest against applying the documentary/fictional divide to the earliest cinematic works and put terms such as “first,” “Czech,” or even “cinema” under scrutiny. Still, the film’s visible bond with the specific time and place of the Exhibition, as well as with the tangible bodies of Josef Šváb-Malostranský and other people who performed for the camera, makes its pioneering status in popular imagination unescapable. Far more important than the self-acknowledgedly²⁶³ primitive plot, in which any sense of order is lost in the chaotic tumult of the crowd,²⁶⁴ is the film’s function as an archival document, a testimony of the Czech Cinematograph’s existence and the people who willingly turned themselves into a spectacle. When Šváb-Malostranský unfolds the poster and looks at us with a grinning expression on his face, he already points towards the film becoming a historic milestone that will circulate in the collective memory for decades to come.

At first sight, *Assignment* might seem like an unproblematic, authoritative archival resource – a straightforward statement of Czech cinema being born, resurfacing whenever someone wants to commemorate the anniversary of the Exhibition or tell a story of how Czech film started in retrospectives, compilations, film documentaries, and TV shows. Yet, this historical overdetermination masks many contradictions, ambiguities, and paradoxes that the film entails – and, crucially, has always entailed. What undergoes not insignificant variations is not just the film’s content – with the two parts often presented separately²⁶⁵ or missing a few seconds – but also the material carrier. The compilations that survived²⁶⁶ never present the original nitrate materials but duplicate prints from later generations. Similar to other surviving

²⁶³ Josef Šváb-Malostranský, “Vzpomínka na prvá milování v Praze,” *Rozpravy Aventina* 3, nos. 18–19 (1928), 222.

²⁶⁴ Jiří Anger, “The Uncertain Oeuvre of a Czech Cinema Pioneer,” *Revue Filmového přehledu*, January 27, 2020, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.filmovyprehled.cz/en/revue/detail/the-uncertain-oeuvre-of-a-czech-cinema-pioneer>.

²⁶⁵ Karel Smrž, the film historian who “rediscovered” Kříženecký’s films in the 1920s, initially argued that the material presented two films – “A Scene at the Mill” (Scéna ve mlýnici) and “Failed Assignment” (Překažené dostaveníčko). See Zdeněk Smejkal, “Rané práce Karla Smrže o dějinách českého filmu,” in *Otázky divadla a filmu*, ed. Artur Závodský (Brno: Universita J.E. Purkyně, 1970), 277.

²⁶⁶ See, for example: *Jan Kříženecký* (Bohumil Veselý, 1968), *How It Started* (Jak to začalo; Květa Lehocová, 1968), *Thank You, Mr. Kříženecký* (Díky, pane Kříženecký; Oleg Reif, 1978), *Jan Kříženecký* (Vojtěch Trapl, 1983) or various episodes of a TV show *In Search of Lost Time* (Hledání ztraceného času; Pavel Vantuch, 1991–2012), particularly “The First Czech with a Crank” (1993).

film materials from Kříženecký's estate, the vintage print has been difficult to screen for more than a hundred years owing to the single pair of round perforations,²⁶⁷ fragility of the nitrate film stock, and its privileged place in the pantheon of Czech cinema. However, even if we put the history of film technology and fascination with nitrate patina in brackets, it should be acknowledged that such treatment involves losing many specific qualities of the image. For example, the grain of the original negative or the mysterious coloration of the vintage print significantly impacts what can or cannot be seen from its content and, consequently, also its archival and documentary function. In other words, what would a casual early cinema aficionado said if he found out that the first screening of Šváb-Malostranský unveiling a Czech Cinematograph poster may not have been in black-and-white as he always thought? Even should he not pay much attention to filmic materiality, his experience of the cinematic milestone without the ingrained marker of "oldness" would have changed drastically.

When we look at the recently digitized film materials (original negative and vintage print) of *Assignment* more thoroughly, we realize that the problem lies deeper. In particular, the print involves moments that make the notorious images harder to discern, including one notable segment that curiously responds to the blind spot that has been associated with the film all along – the gap that happens in-between the poster unveiling and the failed assignment. The newly added opening titles state: "The print survived in two distinct rolls. The fragments were scanned separately and assembled back to the original order." This intervention could be understood as restorative, but due to the decision not to retouch, the bridge between the two parts is anything but seamless. Whereas in the previously seen instances of the film, it was either invisible or highlighted by wipes,²⁶⁸ here it is marked by disruptive scratches at the beginning of the second roll, sharp vertical notches that almost erase the figurative content of the image, i.e., the characters approaching each other and leaning in for a kiss. What some will consider a threat to the film's archival function, others will term true to its material history. To conceptualize *Assignment*'s "archive effect"²⁶⁹ in its complexity, both points of view need to come together.

²⁶⁷ *An Assignment in the Mill* was one of the films that were already duplicated in the 1920s onto the classic Edison perforated film stock (with 4 "angular" perforations on each side of a frame). See Jeanne Pommeau and Jiří Anger, "The Digitization of Jan Kříženecký's Films," *Illuminace* 31, no. 1 (2019), 104–107.

²⁶⁸ This is the case of compilations or documentaries such as *50 Years of Cinema* (50 let kinematografie; František Sádek, 1946), *When Photographs Came to Life* (Když oživily fotografie; Ivo Novák, 1958) or *History of Czechoslovak Cinema, Part I* (Dějiny československé kinematografie I; Vojtěch Količ, 1967).

²⁶⁹ Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London: Routledge, 2014). See also: Rebecca Swender, "Claiming the Found: Archive Footage and Documentary Practice," *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 64 (2009), 3–10.

Again, we encounter a filmic artifact whose meaning, effect, and status depend vitally upon the crack-up between figuration and materiality that arises accidentally and unintentionally. This time, though, the position of both meaning-making spheres changes. First, unlike the color veil, static marks, and camera trembling, the vertical scratches cannot be assigned as inherent characteristics of the film's production process. Being most probably caused by later mishandling of the print, their existence is inseparable from the complex dynamic between materiality and circulation that leads us to perceive physical interventions as ravages of time. The primary function of signs of decay and degradation – such as the well-known dots, dust, and scratches – is to remind us that the archival artifact has covered a long distance between then and now. In this interpretive scheme, it is harder to ascribe to the scratches any specific signification other than the passing of time – unless they communicate with the figurative content in an aesthetically generative manner or speak about something strangely resonating with the history and memory of filmed events. Unfortunately, even when they do, they usually present a rewarding resource for found footage filmmakers and rarely stand on their own.²⁷⁰

Second, the real mystery of *Assignment* does not lie in the origin of a specific technological intervention – which in the case of the vertical scratches cannot ever be fully known – but in the origin of the filmed event, whose (both narratively and literally) divided character turned the scratches into forces shaping its historical place. It is undoubtedly possible to reimagine the color veil in *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge*, static marks in *The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague*, and camera trembling in *Opening Ceremony of the Čech Bridge* through the perspective of the depicted events upon which they intruded and examine how they disrupt their unity, recognizability, and ability to “bear witness.” Nevertheless, none of the respective films portray such a pregnant and contested historical moment as *Assignment* – none of them are tied to the official film history and the official archive of cinematic milestones to nearly the same extent. When scratches arise in moving images that are so inherently recognizable, not only is the perceptual shock stronger – as anyone familiar with psychoanalysis would tell, the “unheimlich” needs the “heimlich”²⁷¹ – but the crack-up becomes more dependent on our recognition of what is represented in the image (and also the

²⁷⁰ Katherine Groo's book *Bad Film Histories* presents a notable exception. Katherine Groo, *Bad Film Histories: Ethnography and the Early Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

²⁷¹ Johannes Binotto, “In Lag of Knowledge: The Video Essay as Parapraxis,” in *Practical Aesthetics*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 83–94; Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005).

context of its making) than in the previous cases. No matter how distorted the frames are, our interpretation of the scratches is filtered through our knowledge and memory of Czech cinema's primal scene, and thus understood primarily in terms of what they add to the historic milestone or what they take away.

To address these differences, a special attention towards questions of epistemology and perception is necessary. Not that the experience of reception in the previous chapters was irrelevant, obviously, but the color veil, static marks, and camera trembling were connected to the films' material and media characteristics to such an extent that they did not need any external authority to give them sense. Although they depended on certain psychological automatisms and benefitted from selective bracketing operations, the specific physical deformations have, in a way, always been there, making way for the crack-up to be actualized once the proportion of figurative and material elements results in their visible interaction. When the emphasis leans to the filmed event as an archival document of a historic milestone, with all the ambiguities such a document brings, and when the physical intrusions are immanent to other established signs of decay, it is the figurative content that waits for a particularly resonating material intervention to make the crack-up tick. And because each cinematic event owes its archival function not just to what was initially put into the scene but also to the pioneering status cemented through circulation and repetition, the crack-up is at its strongest when the physical deformation makes us question whether the depicted reality is what it seems to be. Of course, the shift of emphasis from ontology to epistemology, from a technological given to a structuring event, is not absolute, and the phenomena analyzed in chapters 1–3 and here differ in degree rather than in kind; nevertheless, it still has to be stated to provide a more nuanced picture of the crack-up that Kříženecký's digitized oeuvre offers.

The epistemological and perceptual aspects of the crack-up demand to be anchored in the existing research on archival footage and its ability to evoke contact with the past. Film and media studies have generally paid more attention to this issue in the context of found footage films that reuse archival documents;²⁷² however, with the increasing number of archival materials being circulated and appropriated in the online space, the border between archival

²⁷² See for example: Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films: A Study of the Compilation Film* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964); Patrik Sjöberg, *The World in Pieces: A Study of Compilation Film* (Stockholm: Aura, 2001); Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Steven F. Anderson, *Technologies of History: Visual Media and the Eccentricity of the Past* (New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2011); Catherine Russell, *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

footage and found footage becomes less and less distinguishable. In the last decade, a few significant publications – notably Jaimie Baron’s *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (2014) and Katherine Groo’s *Bad Film Histories: Ethnography and the Early Archive* (2019) – reflected on these shifts and found ways to look at the big question of circulation and materiality through the optics of specific archival film objects. The former monograph introduced the term “archive effect” to rethink archival footage and its various uses as an “experience of reception,”²⁷³ something that resides in the activity of the spectator. Films evoke the archive effect as long as they “offer us a glimpse of the world that existed but has been erased and overlaid with different faces, current fashions, and new technologies.”²⁷⁴ Baron’s perspective helps us ask questions regarding the factors that make us understand the crack-up as revealing something important about history. Crucially, when confronted with an idiosyncratic archival artifact as the digitized vintage print of *Assignment*, the author’s impulse can be prolonged to show that the archive effect does not have to result solely from the distance between then and now or creative appropriation, but from something that is engraved within the archival document itself.

Groo’s project influences this chapter in a more general way. What she calls a “particularist approach to film historiography”²⁷⁵ enables us to take “the absences, imperfections, and discontinuities [...] as crucial concepts and methodological coordinates rather than obstacles to be overcome or resolved.”²⁷⁶ “Bad film histories” remind us that “the historiographic process will be messy, imperfect, and open to revision, especially as our artifacts change, degrade, and disappear from the archives.”²⁷⁷ While Groo focuses on forgotten, nameless, and discarded ethnographic films and we have at our disposal a treasured artifact of Czech cinema, those two are not as incompatible as they might seem. The vintage print of *Assignment* has been deemed, albeit for different reasons, just as unworthy of public attention as the Dutch travelogues, and consequently almost invisible until its digitization. Its punctured and discolored surface has been just as much of an obstacle to seeing the first kiss in Czech cinema as the distorted landscape of ethnographic films preserved by the EYE Filmmuseum blocked the beautiful view of nature. Therefore, even a privileged milestone of early cinema can become part of bad film histories, and, thanks to this dynamic between high and low,

²⁷³ Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 7.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁷⁵ Groo, *Bad Film Histories*, 8.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

make for an all the more interesting research object. Just as the *unheimlich* needs the *heimlich*, nostalgia for a discernible and localizable image of the past seems even more utopian when it confronts a dimension of hiddenness that cannot be scraped away and affects the film's materiality as much as its figuration. Again, considering that bad film histories invite us to start from below, the perspective of a distinctive archival artifact, or even a two-second-long fragment, that does not serve as an example but as an end in itself may help us bring Groo's project to its radical consequences.

The argument shall progress through four stages. First, I elaborate on the relevance of Baron's archive effect for studying the historicity and archival function of artifacts such as *Assignment*, i.e., objects that mark historical and cinematic milestones yet never entirely coincide with themselves. Second, I turn attention to the affective aspects of Baron's conception, demonstrating and problematizing the causality between nostalgia and decaying materiality in found footage films. Third, I wonder whether the crack-up of the pregnant moment in *Assignment* is not a sign that the archive effect is always already riddled with powers of the false. Fourth, I analyze three functions of the crack-up that shape the film's (false?) archive effect. In line with the rest of this dissertation, a singular clash between figurative content and accidental material intervention (scratches tearing apart the first kiss) opens up a theoretical/historical problem (what makes us accept certain images as archival documents?) that forces us to see many well-established concepts of film history and theory (in this case historicity and its relation to nostalgia) as well as practice (in this case repetition and variation of pregnant moments in found footage) in a new light.

4.1. Temporal Disparity of Cinematic Firsts

Debates on what makes film a reliable (or unreliable) source of history have been going on since cinema's birth.²⁷⁸ Boleslaw Matuszewski's celebratory text "A New Source of History" (1898), already mentioned in Chapter 2, inevitably comes to mind, with its belief in film as "ocular evidence that is truthful and infallible par excellence."²⁷⁹ As C. G. Olesen claims, his vision of film has more in common with criminal evidence than with indexical documents of duration, echoing scientific positivism of its time²⁸⁰ rather than the more current theoretical

²⁷⁸ For an overview, see C. G. Olesen, "Film History in the Making" (PhD diss., Amsterdam University, 2017), 40–92.

²⁷⁹ Boleslaw Matuszewski, "A New Source of History," *Film History* 7, no. 3 (1995), 323.

²⁸⁰ Olesen, "Film History in the Making," 43–46.

reference points such as Bazinian index, Benjaminian fragment, or Derridean trace. Nevertheless, it reflects the epistemological naivety that is still present when dealing with archival artifacts of the earliest cinema. When moving images came into public consciousness, any notion of potential manipulation or retouching was less important than their novel ability to “make the dead and gone get up and walk.”²⁸¹ No matter how disturbing, uncanny, or mysterious this sensation of “seeing movement fossilized for the first time” might have been,²⁸² every gesture, expression, or movement of wind in the trees was endowed with meaning, with the idea that “something happened.” In this vein, Šváb holding a Czech Cinematograph transparent, sometimes understood as a mere opening title, bears more importance than any more or less comical plot that was orchestrated. In addition, his manic gestures and mimics throughout the film do not primarily want to persuade us that we are watching a character with feelings and motivations – first, he must make us aware that an event worthy of canonizing is taking place. Time was limited to a few tens of seconds, space reduced to an immobile rectangle, editing virtually non-existent (except for splices),²⁸³ the nitrate carrier in ever-present danger of being burnt or destroyed... that is why the gesturing needed to be as pronounced and unambiguous as possible. The film’s overall “historicity,” i.e., the relationship that it bears to past time and the properties that contribute to it being historically meaningful,²⁸⁴ grows from contextually and materially imposed limitations, and it is precisely the impossibility of their overcoming that turned it into a contested and historically overdetermined archival document right from the beginning.

This instant historicity needs to be considered when theorizing the earliest filmic artifacts and their archive effect. As anyone familiar with Jaimie Baron’s conception will know, one of the basic triggers of the effect is “temporal disparity,” the perception of a distance between “then” and “now” generated within a single text.²⁸⁵ Such disparity can be evoked by juxtaposing shots perceived as produced at different moments in time, as in Alain Resnais’s Holocaust documentary *Night and Fog* (1955), but also by the mere fact that we are watching remnants of reality that were once captured by the camera and covered some distance in time to get to

²⁸¹ Matuszewski, “A New Source of History,” 323.

²⁸² For more on this topic, see Murray Leeder, *The Modern Supernatural and the Beginnings of Cinema* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

²⁸³ See, for example, “escamontage,” a formal practice whereby cuts were made without any apparent break in the framing, described in Genevieve Yue, *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 73–101.

²⁸⁴ Groo, *Bad Film Histories*, 8.

²⁸⁵ Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 18.

the present moment of reception.²⁸⁶ When confronted with films from the pioneering days of cinema, this disparity becomes all the more convoluted. The paradoxical character of early cinematic events – spatiotemporally limited yet pregnant with historic meaning – contests the distance between then and now in minimally two respects. First, there is the idea that the first cinematic attempts – especially those that proclaimed themselves as milestones – bore a special responsibility not only to preserve real events and gestures but also to make their filmic capture historically relevant. Whether the depicted events were festive or quotidian, contingent or carefully planned, it can be intuited that each shooting during the early days involved a certain overestimation of what was about to happen. Making the most out of a brief temporal interval materialized in a static tableau required mastering the art of condensation, realizing, to quote the narrator of Honoré de Balzac’s *The Wild Ass’s Skin* (1831), “how many events crowd into the space of a second, and how many things hang on the throw of a dice!”²⁸⁷ In his famous description of the “pregnant moment,” Roland Barthes spoke of “a hieroglyph in which can be read at a single glance [...] the present, the past and the future; that is, the historical meaning of the represented action,” a “presence of all the absences (memories, lessons, promises) to whose rhythm History becomes both intelligible and desirable.”²⁸⁸ In the earliest cinema, pregnant moments were constantly escaping in-between frames, due both to the relentless movement of the film strip and to the flux of life. What remained was visible evidence of history caught in the making, larger-than-life anticipation that what was happening transcended a specific place in time, a specific “then.” Under these circumstances, how to stipulate temporal disparity if the distance between then and now was already predicted in the film’s creation?

The second pitfall relates to the material carrier. Baron mentions that the temporal disparity must be visible either “at the level of profilmic object” or “at the level of the filmstrip itself – the type of film stock, the color or lack thereof, its degree of damage or disintegration, and so on,” or at both levels at the same time.²⁸⁹ A familiar question of what occurs when physical deformation makes the content barely recognizable resurfaces, but more generally, even if both figurative and material actors participate simultaneously and more or less equally, the recipient most often lacks information to what extent the signs of physical degradation were part of the original “then.” Rips, dots, and dust are accepted as universal marks of a film being

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 17–22.

²⁸⁷ Honoré de Balzac, *The Wild Ass’s Skin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8.

²⁸⁸ Roland Barthes, “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein,” in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 73.

²⁸⁹ Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 21.

“old,” “worn-out,” or “archival,” but they were already pretty typical in the early years of cinema. For example, Yuri Tsivian describes how “the rain effect,” “scratch marks on worn prints that show up as specks flickering vertically down the screen,” became such an established feature of film reception in the beginnings of Russian cinema that it was often difficult to tell how the film would have had looked like without it.²⁹⁰ Also, previously discussed issues of coloration, static electricity, or camera trembling, even should they be recognized as pertaining to the technological dispositif of early cinema by the spectator, would owe their archive effect more to how uncanny or alien they look like compared to both what we usually see in the available early films and what we usually see in contemporary cinema than to any conviction that they reveal the past as it was. The period audience may have seen *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge* through the yellowish-orange filter; however, this memory has been washed down in black-and-white so many times that any notion of “then” must first compete with deeply sedimented ideas of greyscale beginnings of cinema.

This instability of “then” and “now” is further deepened by the “second life” of early cinema. Although Baron focuses primarily on the temporal disparity in found footage and appropriation films, her categorization leaves room for it to arise by circulation through various contexts and in various material states²⁹¹ as well as by digitization or digital restoration.²⁹² However much internet amateurs strive to colorize and upscale early films into a state of an eternal present,²⁹³ or, conversely, however much archivists strive to return the films to the state in which they were screened for the first time,²⁹⁴ the gap between past and present is inescapable. Even in these limit cases, gradual temporal change and aging manifest themselves in the content – different clothes, architecture, even manners of behavior in front of the camera – as well as the carrier – absence of flicker, invariable speed of projection, or no grain in the image. Of course, we could ask whether excessive intervention makes temporal

²⁹⁰ Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 85–86.

²⁹¹ Joanne Bernardi, Paolo Cherchi Usai, Tami Williams, Joshua Yumibe, eds., *Provenance and Early Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021).

²⁹² Baron elaborates on the specificities of the “digital archive effect” in Chapter 5 of her book, though again she speaks mostly of appropriation films, not about archival footage in general. Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 138–172.

²⁹³ Jaron Schneider, “Stop Upscaling and Colorizing Photos and Videos, Historians Say,” *Petapixel*, October 5, 2020, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://petapixel.com/2020/10/05/stop-upscaling-and-colorizing-photos-and-videos-historians-say/?fbclid=IwAR0iy9BJTpRpX3PWuejmbdvTHbp8X5KppEceTw1NTJZRIRBV-M7SumqxQJk>.

²⁹⁴ For example, the National Film Archive in Prague emphasizes that the goal of digital restoration is “to make the film available in a form similar to how it could have been seen by an audience at the time when it was first released.”

disparity more visible or less – on the one hand, it demonstrates how new technology can transform the past and make it actual; on the other, it may question whether the carefully constructed smooth surface leaves any crannies for remnants of the past to emerge. Similarly, Digital Kříženecký as an example of a non-interventionist approach might be perceived both as a project that highlights material historicity and inevitability of loss and as a corpus that may mask many unbreachable differences between the analog past and the digital present.

In this situation, the crack-up does not necessarily help us make better sense of the archive effect in general (nor vice versa). However, it enables us to disprove the illusion that the archival object reveals a discernible and localizable moment of the past that can be clearly divided from the present, and points towards a notion that a cinematic event always already entails a dimension of hiddenness. Laura U. Marks once wrote that cinematic images “do not transparently reflect [the originary event] but obscure it.”²⁹⁵ The archival objects, or what she calls “cultural fossils,” “do not simply bring an aspect of their place of origin to a new site; they also make strange the place into which they arrive.” Thus, they “bring back lost histories in which both origin and destination are implicated,” and also “the radical hybridity already present at both sites.”²⁹⁶ Speaking of Kříženecký’s and Šváb’s *Assignment* and its vintage print scratched in the middle, the goal is not to unveil specific “then” and “now” – conversely, we shall pile up layer upon layer of cracks that arise at the level of figuration, at the level of materiality, and on the boundary between them. Yet, as we deal with a canonical image of Czech film history, there is still that old desire that the temporal disparity can (re)gain brighter contours that also needs to be taken seriously. It is precisely this dialectic between the layering of disruptions and the persistence of nostalgia that guides the following subchapter.

4.2. Limits of Nostalgia

Not surprisingly, Baron’s conceptualization of the archive effect is inextricably linked to nostalgia.²⁹⁷ She emphasizes that the temporal disparity “produces not only the archive *effect*

²⁹⁵ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 124.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ For contemporary understanding of nostalgia in film and media studies, see: Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010); Katharina Niemeyer, ed., *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Jason Sperb, *Flickers of Film: Nostalgia in the Time of Digital Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016); Dominik Schrey, *Analoge Nostalgie in der digitalen Medienkultur* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2017).

but also [...] the archive *affect*.”²⁹⁸ According to her, “not only do we invest archival documents with the authority of the “real” past, but also with the feeling of loss.”²⁹⁹ The euphoric images of Šváb unfolding the formative poster of Czech cinema, kissing a girl, and fighting with local brawlers inevitably (although not exclusively) evoke such feelings – longing for the atmosphere of the end of 19th century, for the glimpses of national revival, for that passion for new technological inventions, for the promises that the new medium (and perhaps also Czech cinema) held. Nonetheless, the digitized vintage print and the original negative both remind us, in their own way, that this historic milestone is now lost, if there ever was in the first place. Ruins, cracks, and imperfections visible everywhere across the figurative and material dimensions and distinctively varying in both preserved “original” versions deny us the soothing feeling of turning back the clock, returning to the lost home, and capturing that blissful moment in a freeze-frame, or at least make it harder to achieve.

An obvious interpretive move is plain to see – we can come back to Svetlana Boym’s famous double of restorative vs. reflective nostalgia (also applied by Jaimie Baron). Just as a reminder: the former “stresses nostos and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home,” the latter “thrives in algia, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately.”³⁰⁰ Whereas restorative nostalgia “signifies a return to the original stasis, to the prelapsarian moment,” and considers the past not a duration but a “perfect snapshot,” reflective nostalgia “suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis,” and focuses on the “meditation on history and passage of time” rather than recovering absolute truths.³⁰¹ It is easy to see the digitized film as inclining towards the reflective variant. Whereas digital restorations usually tend towards “total reconstructions of monuments of the past,” reflective nostalgia “lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time.”³⁰²

Nonetheless, however plausible and intuitive, this account tells only a part of the story and risks leaving many nuances of *Assignment* as an archival document behind. Putting aside the fact that digital restorations performed by archives are increasingly more reflective to the

²⁹⁸ Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 21.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 41.

inherent contradictions that attempts to reconstruct the past involve,³⁰³ and that the digitization of Kříženecký's films may reflect many ravages of time but mask another, even reflective nostalgia is not what it used to be. This argument can be demonstrated by Baron's specific application of Boym's heuristic. In Chapter 4, segment "The Archive Affect and Nostalgia," she employs the restorative/reflective doublet to analyze Bill Morrison's *Decasia: The State of Decay* (2002), Hollis Frampton's *nostalgia* (1971), and Raphael Montañez Ortiz's *Cowboy and "Indian" Film* (1958). Notably, she describes the experience of watching the former film as "one of a constantly evoked desire for something that has been lost, since these fragments are only metonyms for a larger whole that we can never see or experience as they once were."³⁰⁴ The omnipresent decay is the main reason why she perceives the aims of the film as not only restorative but also reflective: "*Decasia's* insistence on the material presence of its appropriated images has the potential to make us aware of the materiality of all things and to remind us that every fragment is a part of a much larger whole."³⁰⁵ Baron seems to fall into the same trap that I have already indicated in previous chapters – she turns physical deformation of filmic matter into a universal sign of loss, a cipher for ruination, fragmentation, and irreversible duration, a "fleeting experience of the otherness of the past."³⁰⁶ Regarding nostalgia, it makes no difference how severe the damage is, where its origin lies, in what ways it may actively shape the figurative content of the image – the most important thing is whether the archive affect is revered (*Decasia*) or subverted by irony (*nostalgia* and *Cowboy and "Indian" Film*). Any film dealing with physical deformation in a serious and solemn manner is apparently destined to dwelling in the irrevocable past, whether it is Morrison's film or Lana Del Rey's music video.³⁰⁷

Baron's scenario limits the range of affects that decay can evoke and the number of ways in which it can help us breach the past/present divide. Baron underestimates the role of the devouring stains in *Decasia* in the figurative processes that give shape to the "inhospitable" world of the present. Morrison's symphony stitches them together to highlight that the only

³⁰³ See, for example: Olesen, "Film History in the Making," 138–143; Giovanna Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*. Third Revised Edition (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018); Sonia Campanini, Vinzenz Hediger and Ines Bayer, "Minding the Materiality of Film: The Frankfurt Master's Program 'Film Culture: Archiving, Programming, Presentation,'" *Synoptique* 6, no. 1 (2018), 79–96.

³⁰⁴ Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 129.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

³⁰⁷ The allegiance between ruin films such as *Decasia* and Lana Del Rey's grainy Super 8 music videos is mentioned surprisingly often, considering the huge difference in the level of physical damages and their role in figurative processes. See, for example: Arild Fetveit, "Death, beauty, and iconoclastic nostalgia: Precarious aesthetics and Lana Del Rey," *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies* 4, no. 2 (2015), 192.

whole in which the deformations can function is a world *of* decay, and not a world *in* decay – as many publications on the Anthropocene testify, there is no need to yearn for the world of decay because we might as well be living it more intensely than ever.³⁰⁸ Nevertheless, there is also the decay’s constitutive impact on what we perceive as the “then” in temporal disparity. Whereas Baron presupposes an imaginary whole that existed before and beyond decay, the images unfolding on the screen present us a vision of early nitrate cinema that is diffused, obscure, and fleeting, and thus perhaps closer to how filmic artifacts circulated in the beginning. *Decasia* does not offer us recognizable images pertaining to a specific time and place, rather the unknowable objects of the early ethnographic archive described by Katherine Groo – “untitled, unauthored, and seemingly infinite in number.”³⁰⁹ For every depiction of a historical monument that went as planned, there were hundreds that gave no way of knowing when the original event ended and when it began, or even how much of the originary event was even captured on camera and consequently made visible in the frames. In this situation, it is not entirely clear which dimension of the event we should be nostalgic about, reflectively or otherwise.

Of course, the case of *Assignment* is different – being a signature early Czech film with a relatively wide circulation in retrospectives, compilations, documentaries, and TV shows and firmly established place in the collective memory. Yet, if we pay attention to the multitude of prints and versions that exist, it is difficult to state which of them presents the referential event – and, in particular, the first kiss – most “faithfully.” The images from various dupes that were used in the compilations, especially those that circulated in Bohumil Veselý’s *Jan Kříženecký* (1968)³¹⁰ or in the episodes of a nostalgic TV show *In Search of Lost Time* (Hledání ztraceného času; 1991–2012),³¹¹ may be the most familiar, but they often do not even show the whole film. For example, Veselý’s compilation omits the first few seconds of the second part, including the very first kiss, the exact segment which is so distorted in the original print; many others show only the first or only the second half. On the other hand, the format that comes closest to making the first kiss perceptible in its entirety – the original negative – was

³⁰⁸ Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³⁰⁹ Groo, *Bad Film Histories*, 256.

³¹⁰ This compilation has been made available on the VOD platform dafilms.cz and consequently on YouTube. “Jan Kříženecký,” YouTube, 2013, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rk2OrOXEmnM>.

³¹¹ See, for example, the episode *The First Czech with a Crack* (První Čech s klikou; Pavel Vantuch, 1993).

not meant for screening, and was only made accessible with the digitization.³¹² The vintage print that was being screened at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries would be considered the most authentic by many; nevertheless, after being torn apart and assembled back together and suffering multiple distinctive scratches in the meantime, the first kiss is now significantly clouded. Restorative nostalgia would not be able to lean on the logic of “before and after” that is (or at least was for a long time) popular among many champions of digital restoration³¹³ – i.e., two versions of a film presented side by side, with a degrading image before restoration on the left and a retouched, crystal-clear image after restoration on the right. Meanwhile, reflective nostalgia would have to include all the versions at once and still not get ahold of what distinguishes the relationship between figuration and materiality in the vintage print from the others.

Thus, if any kind of nostalgia persists, it needs to be conceived in relation to the crack-up. While we are watching the digitized vintage print and get to the punctured moment of a kiss, the archive affect does not fade away; rather, it dissolves across two dimensions. What structures our longing is neither the film as a circulating artifact nor the film as a figurative event – it is the membrane that simultaneously reveals and discloses one at the expense of the other. This ambiguity allows us to make sense of the variety of actors that determine what we can or cannot feel nostalgically about. Furthermore, it can also help us realize how even the material elements that intruded upon the image ex-post can retroactively change the meanings and effects that the original event might or might not have entailed, to the extent that the logics of now/then, past/present, and before/after stop being referential. In order to find a different anchor that steps into the picture when these temporal coordinates stop functioning, we could ask whether the ambiguities and uncertainties should not be imbricated deeper within the archive effect itself.

4.3. Powers of the False

The cinematic firsts are archival documents that bring us assurance yet often also confusion. We return to them to reaffirm our notion that the history of Czech or other national cinema

³¹² See, for example, Olesen, “Film History in the Making,” 143 or Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis, Alexander Horwath and Michael Loebenstein, eds., *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace* (Wien: Synema – Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2008), 208–209.

³¹³ For the criticism of the “before/after” figure in digital restoration, see David Walsh, “There is No Such Thing as Digital Restoration,” in *Work/s in Progress. Digital Film Restoration Within Archives*, eds. Kerstin Parth, Oliver Hanley and Thomas Ballhausen (Vienna: SYNEMA, 2013), 32–33.

began in a specific time and place, thanks to a specific filmmaker who created a specific film object, but the gap in time, lack of convincing historical sources, and also intense circulation and variation cause that the archival evidence is frequently not what it seems. For example, arguably the most canonical work of cinema's earliest period, *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon* (La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon; 1895), was only relatively recently found to exist in at least four versions, with the first one from March 1895 presumably being lost.³¹⁴ Some treasured milestones have been attributed to a wrong filmmaker or a wrong date of production (the case of *Footpads* and other films assigned to Robert W. Paul),³¹⁵ others have been revealed as staged (e.g., Kříženecký's *Square of Purkyně in Královské Vinohrady / Purkyňovo náměstí na Královských Vinohradech*, one of the first three films presented at the Exhibition of Architecture and Engineering).³¹⁶ Another aspect that is often questioned is the films' representation of national themes, which may reproduce or even create prevailing stereotypes (e.g., the abundance of canals, windmills, cheese, tulip fields, and fishing villages in early Dutch films).³¹⁷ And, last but not least, the pioneering status itself has been falsely or truthfully attributed to so many films that it turned into a cliché, parodied by films such as *Forgotten Silver* (Peter Jackson and Costa Botes, 1995).³¹⁸ In this situation, any film historian, theorist, or archivist should embrace the fact that the archive effect, and particularly when evoked by early cinematic works, will always be riddled with the "powers of the false."³¹⁹

³¹⁴ Apparently, the subject was in such heavy demand that it had to be reshot on numerous occasions, as negatives became exhausted. See "FAQ – Movies," L'œuvre cinématographique des frères Lumière, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://catalogue-lumiere.com/faq-movies/>. This information is based on the prior research of Michelle Aubert, Jean-Claude Seguin et al. Michelle Aubert and Jean-Claude Seguin, eds., *La production cinématographique des Frères Lumière* (Paris: BiFi, 1996), 214–215.

³¹⁵ Ian Christie, "Issues of Provenance and Attribution for the Canon: Bookending Robert Paul," in *Provenance and Early Cinema*, eds. Joanne Bernardi, Paolo Cherchi Usai, Tami Williams and Joshua Yumibe (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 70–79.

³¹⁶ Zdeněk Štábla, *Český kinematograf Jana Kříženeckého* (Praha: Československý filmový ústav, 1973), 71. The information is based on a letter that Josef František Pokorný's brother Vincenc sent to the National Technical Museum Prague on February 3, 1953. The film is considered lost.

³¹⁷ Sarah Dellmann, *Images of Dutchness: Popular Visual Culture, Early Cinema and the Emergence of a National Cliché, 1800–1914* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 16–17.

³¹⁸ The film claims to have unearthed a body of film work by a fictional New Zealand filmmaker that proves New Zealanders were responsible for nearly all major innovations in cinema technology, from the invention of color and sound to the narrative structure of feature films. For an analysis of *Forgotten Silver* and other fake documentaries that toy with the powers of the false, see Anderson, *Technologies of History*, 68–87.

³¹⁹ The concept of the "powers of the false" derives from Gilles Deleuze's second book on cinema, specifically from the chapter focused on films that breach the documentary/fiction divide and self-consciously work with formal and thematic fabulation. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989); For the context of this chapter, see also Groo, *Bad Film Histories*, 8.

To conceptualize an archive effect that would be critical of the artifact's claims for truth and temporal disparity, none other than Jaimie Baron comes to the rescue. In Chapter 2 of her book, she analyzes "the ways in which the archive effect may be simulated or manipulated and explore the various reactions to these archival fabrications."³²⁰ She claims that our reactions to fake documentaries such as the aforementioned *Forgotten Silver* "not only demonstrate our desire to believe that such revelatory documents can suddenly be discovered but also simultaneously reveal that found documents can be staged, producing a 'false' archive effect and thereby subsequently undermining our faith in the archive effect as an index of the truth-value of documents about the past."³²¹ Such misuse can teach us to be more critical of the archive effect; however, for Baron, this skepticism is not always positive. In some cases, it may lead us to think more critically about our faith in audiovisual documents and exploit the multiple (even contradictory) meanings hidden within them. In others, it "may also lead us to doubt any found document's truth-value as well as its accepted meaning – especially when it may serve as evidence for something we wish to disbelieve or discount."³²² Thus, on the one hand, we have mockumentaries and essay films that employ the powers of the false for deconstructive purposes; on the other hand, there are "documentaries" that exploit the false archive effect to undermine established historical facts, including the Holocaust and Moon landing, and may promote paranoid or conspiratorial thinking.³²³

The strategies of inducing the false archive effect can be numerous: forging or doctoring audiovisual documents, decontextualization and recontextualization, physical damages, subversive music or voice-over commentary, staged re-enactments, analog or digital retouching, and so forth.³²⁴ In the case of deconstructive found footage films that toy with the powers of the false, a critical juxtaposition is often at play to illustrate the multiplicity of truths and meanings and/or the mutual entanglement between different modes of representation.³²⁵ However, there is one found footage/essay film that is particularly suitable

³²⁰ Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 12.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

³²² *Ibid.*

³²³ In her second monograph, Baron addresses the issue of misusing pre-existing footage from a perspective of ethics, see Jaimie Baron, *Reuse, Misuse, Abuse: The Ethics of Audiovisual Appropriation in the Digital Era* (New Brunswick and Newark: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

³²⁴ See also Alex W. Bordino, "Found Footage, False Archives, and Historiography in Oliver Stone's JFK." *The Journal of American Culture* 42, no. 2 (2019), 112–120.

³²⁵ See the videographic exploration of Alfréd Radok's essay film *Distant Journey* (Daleká cesta; 1948) that me and Jiří Žák made for the National Film Archive, Prague: Jiří Anger and Jiří Žák, "Distant Journey through the Desktop," *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies* 8, no. 1 (2021), accessed July 31, 2021, <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/distant-journey-through-desktop>.

for the context of early cinema (and pre-cinema), temporal disparity, and the first kiss – Thom Andersen’s *Eadweard Muybridge, Zoopraxographer* (1975). Dedicated to the notorious pioneer of moving-image technology and one of the so-called precursors of cinema, the film offers a cinematic take on Muybridge’s photographic and chronophotographic experiments of the 1860s and 1870s.³²⁶ Notably, the film ends with a poignant cinematic rendition of Muybridge’s famous sequential photography, *The Kiss* (1872). We see a staged reproduction of the iconic scene, “falsified” by color, stop-motion technique, and re-enactment by contemporary actresses, that, curiously enough, gets close to the jerky, flickering movement of the original. Due to the disposition of the Zoopraxiscope, each gesture was divided into successive but distinct phases separated by inevitable moments of darkness.³²⁷ Andersen foregrounds this discontinuity by cinematic means, simulating the interval between images by inserted black frames. Just as the two female figures are moving increasingly close to each other, the interval becomes shorter and shorter until it disappears right at the moment of the kiss. It is only by going against the grain of both modern cinema and its vision of a smooth, continuous movement between frames and Muybridge’s sequential photography and its development of a single gesture that never truly materializes that the pregnant moment of the kiss can become visible. In other words, the false archive effect arises out of the Bergsonian “retrograde movement of the true”³²⁸ that allows us to imagine what would happen if the Zoopraxiscope resolved its inherent contradictions and developed into cinema as we know it. Yet, perhaps more important than the result is the deconstructive process that shows us that even a pioneering cinematic moment that resonates in our memory is assembled from myriad micro-events scattered across the figurative and material dimensions of the images.

Thus far, the false archive effect has been attributed to found footage/appropriation films that produce it intentionally. Nevertheless, what if the elements that make us doubt the indexical value and temporal disparity of the document arose from the filmic object itself? What if it could emerge when we realize that a well-known archival object is not what it used to be? Nowadays, every archival document uploaded on the internet always already bears marks of

³²⁶ For a general overview of the film, see Joseph Sgammato, “Naked Came the Stranger: Eadweard Muybridge, Zoopraxographer (Thom Andersen, 1975),” *Senses of Cinema* 20, no. 86 (2018), accessed July 31, 2021, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2018/cteq/eadweard-muybridge-zoopraxographer-1975/>.

³²⁷ See, for example: Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 199–205 or Eszter Polonyi, “Flicker: Thom Andersen Takes Muybridge to the Movies,” in *Provenance and Early Cinema*, eds. Joanne Bernardi, Paolo Cherchi Usai, Tami Williams, Joshua Yumibe (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 287–304.

³²⁸ Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2012), 11.

past, present, and future appropriation,³²⁹ and both analog and digital deformations can alter the figurative content on their own merits. Under these circumstances, even a short, seemingly unimportant moment that lasts only a few seconds, such as the fractured divide in *Assignment*, may disturb our belief in archival footage and broaden our notion of what constitutes the archive effect in the first place. The crack-up that emerges out of the encounter between the first kiss and the vertical scratches has the potential to become such an accidental, unintentional power of the false, blurring the content to reveal a multitude of actors that need to be taken into account if we dare to label a specific filmic object as archival.

4.4. Scratch That Kiss

“It all started with a kiss.” That is how Chuck Workman’s *The First Hundred Years: A Celebration of American Movies* (1995) starts, and it is certainly not the only documentary on the history of cinema that begins in this fashion. Workman refers to the notorious film *The Kiss* (or *The May Irwin Kiss*) that William Heise made for Thomas Alva Edison in 1896. The film turned into a public sensation and sparked a huge debate on its supposed transgression of moral codes.³³⁰ Even more important is its promise of visibility, stressed by the creators as well as period journalists. The film shows two actors, May Irwin and John Rice, kissing each other in a medium close-up shot, which only highlights its novelty and visceral impact.³³¹ A journalist writing on the film, for example, noted that the eighteen-second film’s “six hundred different phases of a kiss leave little to the imagination.”³³² Another report titled “Anatomy of a Kiss” stated: “For the first time in the history of the world it is possible to see what a kiss looks like... In the forty-two feet of kiss recorded by the kinoscope every phase is shown with startling distinctness... The real kiss is a revelation. The idea of the kinoscopic kiss has unlimited possibilities.”³³³ Although we have relatively little information on the period reception of *An Assignment in the Mill*,³³⁴ the first kiss, framed in a tableau shot yet

³²⁹ See, for example, Russell, *Archiveology* and Baron, *Reuse, Misuse, Abuse*.

³³⁰ Charles Musser, “The May Irwin Kiss: Performance and the Beginnings of Cinema,” in *Visual Delights – two: Exhibition and Reception*, eds. Vanessa Toulmin and Simon Popple (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2005), 96–115.

³³¹ Jonathan Auerbach. *Body Shots: Early Cinema’s Incarnations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 73–75.

³³² Quoted in: Jordan Schonig, “Cinema’s Motion Forms: Film Theory, the Digital Turn, and the Possibilities of Cinematic Movement” (PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 2017), 92.

³³³ Quoted in: Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 27.

³³⁴ For the reception of Kříženecký’s films in their time and later accounts by his colleagues and companions, see Jaroslav Lopour, “Zatím jsme uboží břídilové, a je těžké se s tím sprátelit!: Vzpomínky na začátky české filmové výroby do roku 1914,” *Iuminace* 31, no. 4 (2019), 90–126.

immediately followed by subsequent kisses between the characters, shares with *The May Irwin Kiss* (and other “first” cinematic kisses) the pioneering status and the sensation of perceiving an intimate and taboo event through the lens of a new medium.

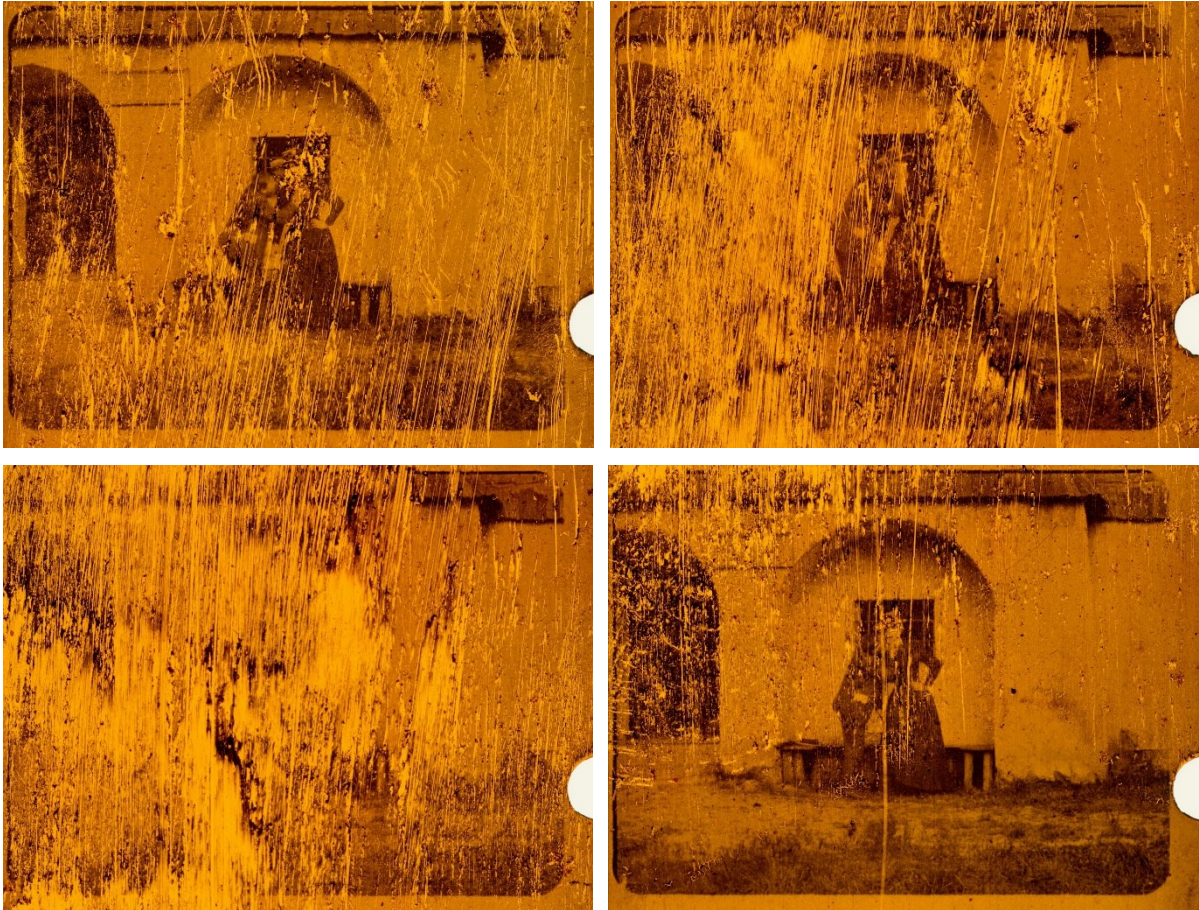
What happens, then, when such a moment of plenitude gets scratched? By scratching, I do not mean the predictable marks that appear on every single worn-out film print – the vertical scratches signaling the first kiss in *Assignment* distort the image’s content so gravely that the neuralgic point of early cinematic fascination almost ceases to exist. The fractured divide recalls the techniques of scratching the film strip, ever-present in found footage filmmaking from the politically-informed work of Lettrists and Situationists to contemporary photochemical experiments with human and non-human materiality and viscosity by artists such as Vicky Smith, Johanna Vaude, or Péter Lichter.³³⁵ Rather than merely evoking analog nostalgia,³³⁶ the scratches as powers of the false are at play to unleash different ways of looking at pre-existing footage, unmasking the information discernible in the image as potentially more obscuring than revealing. Their uncompromising violence upon the image threatens the “ideology of the visible,” the pretense that seeing a filmed reproduction of (present or past) reality equals recognizing and understanding that reality;³³⁷ concerning the image content, our eyes betray us. The film’s surface reveals that the archive effect depends on materiality just as much as on figuration and, crucially, that the former can outweigh the latter to such an extent that its bond to a specific time, space, and bodies is at best arbitrary and temporary.

Be that as it may, the tainted kiss in Kříženecký’s film cannot be assessed by rules applicable to found footage scratch films – it relates to the (false) archive effect in its own unique way. I would hereby propose three functions that the scratches vis-à-vis the kiss represent.

³³⁵ See, for example, Kim Knowles, *Experimental Film and Photochemical Practices* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). For more information on scratch film and scratch video, see Ingrid Guardiola Sánchez, “La imagen dialéctica en el audiovisual found footage: Un hiperarchivo de conceptos visuales” (PhD diss., Universidad Pompeu Fabra, 2015), 38–39; 389–396.

³³⁶ As Thomas Levin notes: “The moment of the scratch is no longer the signal of malfunction but is instead the almost nostalgic trace of a bygone era of mechanical reproducibility.” Thomas Y. Levin, “Indexicality Concrète: The Aesthetic Politics of Christian Marclay’s Grammophonía,” *Parkett*, no. 56 (1999), 162.

³³⁷ Jean-Louis Comolli, “Machines of the Visible,” in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, eds. Teresa De Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), 121–142.



Figures 4.5–4.8: *An Assignment in the Mill* (Dostaveníčko ve mlýnici; 1898, source: nitrate print) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

1) Scratches as indices – This function resonates with the electric horses in Chapter 2, only this time the indices derive their origin from the circulation of the film stock rather than the film’s production process. They result from improper handling of the nitrate material (by filmmakers, projectionists, printers, archivists, or laboratory workers?) and/or from unexpected technological failure (e.g., by the film roll almost being ripped apart by the apparatus?). As Katherine Groo describes, “we have no way of knowing where, how, by whom, or by what they were formed,” and thus they refuse the epistemologies that presuppose a causal link between how the elements of the image originated and how we perceive them.³³⁸ In other words, unlike the static marks in *Spring Races*, the vertical scratches in *Assignment* bear no special relation to the kiss captured by the camera (other than distorting what remained of it ex-post) – their information value is limited to the assurance of the film’s historicity, vulnerability to the ravages of time. And yet, the scratches are not entirely

³³⁸ Groo, *Bad Film Histories*, 281.

“hollowed-out signs,” as Mary Ann Doane would say.³³⁹ Although they do so accidentally, they happen to provide insight into the nature of their object. Appearing at the beginning of the second film roll, and for that reason perhaps more inclined towards damage, they emphasize the sutured character of the material that has been present all along. If the kiss were something that needed to occur separately from the unveiling of the poster, the scratches would indicate nothing but the fact that this separation in the figurative universe eventually found its way into the material universe. The emergent crack-up is a reminder that even elements that supposedly obscure, blur, or falsify the film’s representation can make us perceive what was unique about the archival document in the first place.

2) Scratches as cuts – This may sound overly speculative, but the vertical scratches create a way to make the otherwise invisible divide between the two scenes meaningful and resonant. As Charles Musser demonstrates, in the earliest days of cinema, editorial control was primarily held by the exhibitor, not the image-maker – “the process of assembling material into a coherent program was physically occurring in the course of exhibition.”³⁴⁰ In 1898,³⁴¹ a single shot or tableau was a defining unit of a film, and should a distinctive cinematic work consist of more than one tableau, the shots just mechanically followed one another. The exhibitor was responsible for juxtaposing individual shots and films within a screening program to create meaningful connections. Moreover, the dynamic between the segments was controlled by the operator – the way he or she moved the crank, slowly or quickly, forward or backward, structured the audience’s attention as well as its affective engagement.³⁴² This was particularly handy with regards to kissing scenes – as Paolo Cherchi Usai says, when two lovers are hesitating before exchanging a kiss, “how long they will wait before embracing each other is entirely up to the projectionist.”³⁴³ The shift of attention that the vertical scratches enact allows us to imagine a retrograde thought experiment: What if we considered such physical interventions as forms of editing suited for an age when the cinematic exhibition was too volatile and the creative postproduction as we know it had yet to be invented? The punctured skin of the film we perceive when the characters approach each other and kiss for the first time turns the succession of shots into a meaning-making unit. It

³³⁹ Mary Ann Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity,” *Differences* 18, no. 1 (2007), 133.

³⁴⁰ Charles Musser, “When Did Cinema Become Cinema? Technology, History, and the Moving Pictures,” in *Technology and Film Scholarship: Experience, Study, Theory*, ed. Santiago Hidalgo (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 40.

³⁴¹ In this particular case, there was not much difference between the Czech lands and the rest of the world.

³⁴² Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: A Guide to Study, Research and Curatorship* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 181–185.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 315.

recalls the fact that the interval between two shots is never empty, always involving creative and material work, which, as the example of Thom Andersen's Muybridge documentary showed, also applies to a (however seemingly unified) gesture of kissing. Understood in this way, the crack-up might not only turn the scratches into meaning-making actors but also into media-reflexive gestures.

3) Scratches as events – The split between two planes of existence highlighted by the vertical lines may also tell us a thing or two about the fundamental incompleteness of cinematic events. As indicated before, *An Assignment in the Mill* as a Czech cinema milestone evokes nostalgic sentiments yet also trauma. With the vertical scratches ripping the most soothing moment apart, such anxiety derives not only from our insecurity whether the event initially happened just like we see it with hindsight but also from our fear that it might not have had happened at all. The more pressure is put on the film to initiate Czech film history, the more accurate is Katherine Groo's Derrida-inspired formulation that "the event [...] escapes its reproduction and preservation in the archive. It rips a hole in history and leaves a void."³⁴⁴ Regardless, this closing of the event is also a way of opening. The convenient localization of the scratches right at the divide in the vintage print can be read as a cipher for all the processes in the film that have never been – and will never be – fully realized. No matter how perfectly restored and digitized the original film strip was, the scar stands as a reminder that it will always be torn in two. No matter how majestic Šváb and his entourage look with the Czech Cinematograph poster, the introduction will always be interrupted way too soon. No matter how many kisses we see afterward, the actual first kiss of Czech cinema will never materialize. The only thing we can do with this absence is to embrace it and try to repeat the unrepeatable.

4.5. Coda: Never Happening, Always Repeating

In light of this triple function, the vertical scratches reveal that the archive effect does not necessarily depend on temporal disparity, reflective or restorative nostalgia, or appropriative intervention (without denying their value). The crack-up enacted between the first kiss and the film's fractured surface delineates the archival experience as always-already pervaded with the powers of the false. It is not crucial where, how, by whom, or by what the rips emerged,

³⁴⁴ Groo, *Bad Film Histories*, 95. See also: Jacques Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2)," in *Without Alibi* (California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 135–136.

nor whether any precise reproduction of the event had existed prior to such physical deformation. The mere existence of the scratches changes the rules of the game, expressing nothing but the difficulty of expressing anything vis-à-vis the essential vulnerability of both filmic matter and cinematic firsts, and presenting a true “means without end,” as Giorgio Agamben would say.³⁴⁵

The newly found openness of the first kiss in *An Assignment in the Mill* waits to be developed further. In a way, it addresses D. N. Rodowick’s call for films that turn a potentially nostalgic or elegiac relation to past images into a creative destruction that “transforms the ontology of the image, unleashing new potentials within it, and new relations with it.”³⁴⁶ In 2021, the digitized vintage print was finally made available in the online space,³⁴⁷ which of course poses an opportunity for numerous ways of appropriation, ways of creating Baron’s “intentional disparity” between the current perception of the footage and how it was created and received in its time.³⁴⁸ The potential of the scratched kiss as “a moment that constantly passes and therefore does not pass”³⁴⁹ can be unveiled in animated GIFs, compilations, experimental found footage films, or scholarly videographic essays. One example among all, if this chapter mentioned *Eadweard Muybridge, Zoopraxographer*, why not subject the divide between the rolls to a similar deconstruction, adapted to the digital technology? 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.”³⁵⁰

³⁴⁵ Giorgio Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 49–62.

³⁴⁶ D. N. Rodowick, *What Philosophy Wants from Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 22.

³⁴⁷ “Jan Kříženecký: Dostaveníčko ve mlýnici (1898),” YouTube, 2021, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=in3KxidxNwU>.

³⁴⁸ Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 23.

³⁴⁹ Rodowick, *What Philosophy Wants from Images*, 18.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

5. Touching the Film Object with Surgical Gloves

Laughter and Tears, Spliced Frames, and the Fragile Malleability of Cinematic Faces

July 1898. Another acting exercise staged and performed by Josef Šváb-Malostranský is being screened at the Exhibition. This time, nothing is left to the imagination. Šváb's face in a close-up shot mimics two recognizable emotions – laughter and crying. However, despite the seemingly unambiguous intention to express two generic emotions through codified theatrical gestures, there is something strangely volatile about Šváb's facial expressions. Each transition from laughter to tears, from one phase of the gesture to the next, from a discernible face to a sutured mass of filmic matter, is riddled with unbearable weight. Provided we want to capture the film's affective AND theoretical generativity with hindsight, is touching the film frame by frame a way to decipher the actor's facial expressions or to make them even more concealed?



Figures 5.1–5.4: *Laughter and Tears* (Smích a pláč; 1898, source: nitrate print) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

Laughter and Tears (Smích a pláč; 1898, source: vintage print), one of the three joint ventures of Kříženecký and Šváb at the Exhibition of Architecture and Engineering,³⁵¹ stands out from the rest of the first Czech films for its (supposedly?) all-revealing and self-explanatory character. This quality appears here somewhat prematurely, as a deviation from the tableauized spaces of period films.³⁵² It was certainly not the first cinematic work that involved a close-up of a face³⁵³ as Šváb later claimed.³⁵⁴ Nonetheless, it came earlier than many pieces celebrated for a pioneering achievement in this respect – three years earlier than *The Big Swallow* (James Williamson, 1901), five years earlier than *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903), fourteen years earlier than *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (D. W. Griffith, 1912). More importantly, when viewed retrospectively, *Laughter and Tears* presents a utopian promise of a close-up as an end in itself, not as one of the many figures incorporated into the narrative system – a cinematic face as a self-sufficient unit that reveals the most basic emotions as well as affective micro-changes.

A film with such an explicit emphasis on affectivity is bound to elicit strong emotional responses and close engagement from the audience. However, once again, the film's physical characteristics trouble the issue. Out of the film materials from the 1890s in Kříženecký's estate, only a vintage print survived, bearing visible signs of mechanical damage and the now-familiar color palette (from yellow to orange to red). The landscape of Šváb's face must confront itself with minuscule rips, dots, and dust as well as with colored textures – from orange lines to large red stains – that create landscapes of their own. In some of the frames, splices remain visible as marks of the film kept from falling apart only at a price of Šváb's head being covered with stitches and divided into zones of different colors. The close-up, an emblem of absolute visibility, is revealed as a cracked surface prone to invasions from external actors of various origins. The most important thing is what happens between those poles – figurative and material worlds clash one more time, and it is not easy to tell whether

³⁵¹ The other two are *An Assigination in the Mill* (Dostaveníčko ve mlýnici) and *Exhibition Sausage Seller and Bill-Poster* (Výstavní párkař a lepič plakátů).

³⁵² Scott Curtis, Philippe Gauthier, Tom Gunning and Joshua Yumibe, eds., *The Image in Early Cinema: Form and Material* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

³⁵³ See, for example, *Fred Ott's Sneeze* (William K. L. Dickson, 1894). According to Zdeněk Štábala, one German film, *From Seriousness to Laughter* (Vom Ernst zur Lachen; produced by Oskar Messter, 1897), was even based on a very similar theme. Zdeněk Štábala, *Český kinematograf Jana Kříženeckého* (Praha: Československý filmový ústav, 1973), 81.

³⁵⁴ Josef Šváb-Malostranský, "Vzpomínka na prvá milování v Praze," *Rozpravy Aventina* 3, nos. 18–19 (1928), 222.

the color blotches disrupt the close-up or whether the facial expressions rupture the inert pulsation of the film's skin.

What distinguishes the present examination of the crack-up in *Laughter and Tears* from the one investigated in, for example, *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge* is precisely its relation to a formal feature and thematic content that draw the spectator into proximity. The close-up of Šváb's performance mobilizes what Anne Rutherford terms a "mimetic hook, bringing the spectator into contact with the image in a way that blurs the boundaries between self and other, viewer and [viewed], inside and outside of the image."³⁵⁵ The level of physical deformation may alienate some spectators, but chiefly it highlights how close to the image we really are and how this proximity does not always have to be revelatory and altogether pleasant. Additionally, the splices demonstrate not only the composite nature of the cinematic figure but also touch's disturbing power to tear a film apart and assemble it back together. The film that we "touch" with our eyes touches us back, and not necessarily in the way we expect – to paraphrase Jean-Louis Chrétien, by no means does the touched have to respond in the same way as it is touched.³⁵⁶ Approaching such a distorted film object, let alone connecting with it on an emotional level, seems risky, even in the newly accessible digitized form.

To conceptualize this dissymmetric touch, we need to return to the concept of "haptic visuality." This term has cemented a vital place in film and media studies over the last 25 years, mainly due to the legacy of Laura U. Marks, who appropriated it from art historian Alois Riegl, or, more precisely, from Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's interpretation of Riegl's distinction between haptic and optic visuality.³⁵⁷ The opening sentence of the entry on haptic visuality in *A Dictionary of Film Studies* states: "A sense of physical touching or being touched engendered by an organization of the film image in which its material presence is

³⁵⁵ Anne Rutherford, *What Makes a Film Tick? Cinematic Affect, Materiality and Mimetic Innervation* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2011), 30.

³⁵⁶ Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

³⁵⁷ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry* (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1985); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). For more general philosophical and aesthetic accounts of hapticity, see Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (London: Routledge, 2007) or Mika Elo and Miika Luoto, eds., *Figures of Touch: Sense, Technics, Body* (Helsinki: The Academy of Fine Arts at the University of the Arts Helsinki, 2018).

foregrounded and which evokes close engagement with surface detail and texture.”³⁵⁸ This notion proposed an idea of film experience that invites us to contemplate the image itself rather than being pulled into the narrative flow and/or to overcome the distance between subject and object and immerse ourselves in the sensations the film produces.³⁵⁹ Crucially, the material presence derives from the surface textures of bodies and objects as much as from the skin of the film, leaving many opportunities for filmmakers to mix both and produce variations of the crack-up that wait to be actualized by spectators.

Haptic visuality is explicitly linked to a distinctive way of approaching films reflexively and at the same time without losing or denying one’s affective engagement. Despite many attempts to prove otherwise, a film critic, theorist, or archivist is expected to maintain a certain level of distance, show that he or she can tame the luring of the apparatus or at least project his/her fascination with the film into words and arrange them into a reasonable argument. Still, the close-up has been an area where the professional is given more leeway to lose himself and let himself become overwhelmed by the sheer affective power. The way it was championed by early film theorists such as Jean Epstein, Béla Balázs, Walter Benjamin, or Karel Teige³⁶⁰ testifies to this notion. Jordan Schonig aptly describes how Jean Epstein’s essay “Magnification” (1921), one of the formative texts in this respect, begins “with a declaration of love for the close-up and a concession about the inadequacies of language to express that love,” but “expresses it nevertheless.”³⁶¹ Even otherwise rigorous thinkers are allowed to use highly subjective, poetic, even esoteric language and bestow upon the close-up abilities to reveal “the hidden life of little things”³⁶² or “entirely new structural formations of the subject.”³⁶³ In the contemporary discourse of film studies, these ideas laid the groundwork

³⁵⁸ Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 201.

³⁵⁹ For more recent applications of haptic visuality in film studies, see, for example: Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetic, Matter, and Media* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014); Saige Walton, *Cinema’s Baroque Flesh: Film, Phenomenology and the Art of Entanglement* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016); Asbjørn Grønstad, Henrik Gustafsson and Øyvind Vågnes, eds., *Gestures of Seeing in Film, Video and Drawing* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

³⁶⁰ See, for example: Béla Balázs, Erica Carter (ed.), *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010); Jean Epstein and Stuart Liebman, “Magnification and Other Writings,” *October*, vol. 3 (1977), 9–25; Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 219–253; Karel Teige, “K filmové avantgardě,” in *Otázky divadla a filmu. III*, ed. Artur Závodský (Brno: Universita J.E. Purkyně, 1973), 303–328.

³⁶¹ Jordan Schonig, “Cinema’s Motion Forms: Film Theory, the Digital Turn, and the Possibilities of Cinematic Movement,” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2017), 263.

³⁶² Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of the New Art* (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd, 1952), 54.

³⁶³ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 16.

for what Marks called “haptic criticism,” a manner of studying film that “keeps its surface rich and textured, so it can interact with things in unexpected ways. It has to be humble, willing to alter itself according to what it is in contact with.”³⁶⁴

For this sense of haptic visuality, *Laughter and Tears* seems to be a perfect case study. Šváb’s face enlarged and abstracted from everything else but the spectator, sensations not only implied but literally enacted, marks of the nitrate stock’s damages and distortions clearly visible, many new options for material formation and deformation enabled by the digitization... The mysterious, almost mystical qualities ascribed to the close-up by early film theorists show themselves as potentialities hidden not only within the depicted face but also within the seemingly profane filmic matter. Yet, it is precisely the easiness of such interpretation that should warn us against applying it too mechanically. One ought to remain wary of two fallacies in particular – intentional fallacy and negative ontology – both inspired by Eugenie Brinkema’s notorious critique of affect theory’s shortcomings.³⁶⁵ First, unlike the arthouse and experimental films and videos Marks and her followers champion, the dissonance between the figurative and material dimensions in *Laughter and Tears* cannot be attributed to intentional design. Even though haptic criticism frequently cherishes film moments that are not necessarily authorially purposive, there is a prevailing idea that haptic visuality is staged to provoke a mimetic response. For example, Marks’s influential notion of film spectatorship presupposes a fusion between subject and object, a “concomitant loss of self in the presence of the other,”³⁶⁶ in which the primary function of the aesthetic object is to produce sensations in the viewers, make us feel that the image and its manifold details exist “for us.”³⁶⁷ In other words, an image is conceived as affectively stimulating Other that overwhelms the spectator without any opportunities for negotiating or oppositional reading, and thus risks becoming a fetish. This intentional fallacy turns out as doubly problematic for *Laughter and Tears*, as there is no clear causality between the film as originally schemed by Kříženecký and Šváb, the film as a circulating and decaying object, and the film as being watched in the digitized form. Rather than presupposing mutual embodiment between the viewer and the film image, *Laughter and Tears* offers a kind of distributed embodiment in which the individual actors operate according to their own rhythms, and any productive

³⁶⁴ Laura U. Marks, “Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes,” *Framework the Finnish Art Review*, no. 2 (2004), 79–82.

³⁶⁵ Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

³⁶⁶ Marks, *Touch*, 20.

³⁶⁷ Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 31–33.

intersection between them depends on an imaginative (re)shaping of the crack-up by a critical spectator.

The second shortcoming echoes Eugenie Brinkema's criticism of affect theory's "negative ontology."³⁶⁸ The encounter with the otherworldly moving image seems to "happen too quickly to have happened,"³⁶⁹ to use the words of Brian Massumi; and therefore, the only perceptible effect is that of a rupture. The norms that are being disrupted can be multiple – classical figuration, mimetic representation, sensorimotor schema, linear narration, central perspective, fixation on content, and so on – but the event of shattering the "ordinary" is almost always present. It is no wonder that haptic criticism, which is one of the products of the "affective turn" in film studies and other disciplines,³⁷⁰ mostly does not offer proper instruments to analyze the specific forms that invoke these extreme sensations. In the case of *Laughter and Tears*, speaking of the close-up would no longer be enough, as it now itself constitutes a standardized, all-too-recognizable form. Similarly, wallowing in the ability of decaying matter to dissolve visible figures does not tell us much about how the (accidental) interaction between the figurative and material agents may or may not incite the experience of touching and being touched by the film object. As the digitized artifact is always already infiltrated by diverse materialities and autonomous processes and the details that arouse desire appear randomly and briefly, the noblest way of touching the unattainable object is approaching it one step at a time. In order to find specific forms of the affects, touch must be taken literally, extended to the individual frames which have their own ways of invoking affective responses. This time, looking at the films frame by frame³⁷¹ would not just serve to track the emergence of the crack-up as in Chapter 1 but contribute towards an active reshaping of the film experience, portraying the film as constructed of units that are themselves malleable and reshapeable.

Thus, this dissertation arrives at a (thus far only latent) phase that examines the transformative effects that one's close encounter with the crack-up bears on the subject and the object. In the

³⁶⁸ Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 30–31.

³⁶⁹ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 30.

³⁷⁰ Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

³⁷¹ Hannah Frank, *Frame by Frame: A Materialist Aesthetics of Animated Cartoons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

31-second-long *Laughter and Tears*,³⁷² there are many frames around which the spectator can reconstruct the film, turn it into a quasi-experimental found footage work or a videographic essay. These two formats of practical research provide much inspiration for haptic criticism – through their capacity to touch the film’s images and sounds themselves and their ability to engage the body-in-film and the body-of-film at the same time. Their input is crucial for correcting the inclination of much written haptic criticism for either abstract musings on the elusiveness and transitivity of affect or subjectivist descriptions of bodily sensations. Eric Faden, one of the earliest practitioners of the discipline now called “videographic film studies,”³⁷³ sums it up nicely: “If I’m reading about the haptic or whatever, I may be tempted to throw my arms up in confusion. But the exciting challenge is to take the abstraction of the theory and make it concrete in the video form.”³⁷⁴ This context is crucial for understanding how touching a film object (especially one that is already cracked) implies its appropriation and creative reimagination.

Equipped with the conceptual tools of haptic criticism and practical aesthetics, the attempts at touching and being touched by *Laughter and Tears* shall proceed in three stages. The first one concerns itself with the basic epistemic conditions of haptic contact between the critic and the film object in the digital space. Haptic criticism’s emphasis on marginal details and so-called “cinephiliac moments” poses an opportunity for self-reflexive, quasi-methodological examination that might lead towards transformation of the analyzed film and the subject-object relations. The second passage demonstrates how this epistemological shift is put into practice in videographic film studies. The haptic tendency in this discipline, particularly in the works by Catherine Grant, offers us tools for analysis that is affectively charged yet highly attentive to specific forms and figures. However, when confronted with uncertain artifacts as Kříženecký’s digitized films, it is particularly crucial not to mistake videographic reshaping of the film object for possessing it. If we want to touch and be touched by films, we ought to target the elements that are already (however latently) present in them, and therefore find ways to prolong their crack-up. The final step is to investigate the specific configuration of the crack-up in selected frames of *Laughter and Tears* – those in which Šváb’s head is

³⁷² Including the newly added opening titles and black frames at the end and considering the projection speed of 24 fps.

³⁷³ Volker Pantenburg, “Videographic Film Studies,” in *Handbuch Filmanalyse*, eds. Malte Hagener and Volker Pantenburg (Berlin: Springer, 2020), 485–502.

³⁷⁴ Eric Faden, “In Dialogue: Eric Faden and Kevin B. Lee,” in *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy*, eds. Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant (Scalar, 2019), accessed July 31, 2021, <http://videographicessay.org/works/videographic-essay/in-dialogue-eric-faden-and-kevin-b-lee?path=contents>.

stitched by a splice. By discerning two forms of the close-up – the figurative one and the material one – the analysis of the spliced frames portrays the cinematic face as a landscape consisting of manifold materialities and auto-regulative processes and highlights potentialities stemming from combining the two facial modalities in surprising ways. The encompassing aim of this chapter is to reveal the haptic subject as someone who does not merely want to use the film object as a projection screen for his own fantasies and emotions but as someone who respectfully guides the tendencies hidden within the object’s nuances and touches it with surgical gloves.

5.1. The Cinephiliac Moment

In one of her breakthrough studies, “Video Haptics and Erotics” (1998), Laura U. Marks suffuses her writing about the videotape *It Wasn’t Love* (Sadie Benning, 1992) with tactile sensations right from the beginning. She describes her experience as “going on a journey into states of erotic being” that evokes “the longing for intimacy with another,” “the painful and arousing awareness” of being “close yet distinct” to the author/protagonist, a loss of “sense of [her] own boundaries.”³⁷⁵ However, what triggered these intense sensations was a seemingly marginal moment – Benning slowly sucking her thumb, inches away from the unfocusable, low-resolution camera – that caused “the uncanny loss of proportion in which big things slip beyond the horizon of my awareness while small events are arenas for a universe of feeling.”³⁷⁶ It is this marginal detail that allows Marks to shape the future language of haptic criticism. More important than its role in the film’s formal structure or narrative action is the secret that it contains, something elusive yet piercing that establishes an encounter between the film/video object and the attuned film critic/scholar. The words stop being able to “lift off” the surface of the film object and the arresting fragment,³⁷⁷ and instead of trying to possess it, they seek to express how indescribable, unanalyzable, or uninterpretable yet relentlessly seductive the fragment (and her attachment to it) really are.

Nonetheless, I would argue that the most fruitful moments of haptic criticism, and any kind of scholarly analysis that projects affective engagement with its objects, do not lie in descriptions of bodily vibrations. More potential is enclosed in self-reflexive, quasi-

³⁷⁵ Laura U. Marks, “Video Haptics and Erotics,” *Screen* 39, no. 4 (1998), 331.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁷ Marks, “Haptic Visuality.”

methodological accounts of how this intense bond might unleash a minor perspective from which the film object could appear in previously unseen contours. From Marks's account, we learn how she overcame the distance between her and the film and how these close encounters of the third kind often result from a marginal, non-expressive detail, but we do not come to know much more about the detail itself. Is it something hidden within the image that is waiting to be discovered by an attentive beholder? Or is it something that comes into existence because of resonating with the spectator's subjective feelings, thoughts, and associations? If it is a mix of the two, how can this attachment to a peripheral detail lead to a compelling reimagination or even resignification of the respective film? Trying to touch the films of Jan Kříženecký, in the absence of any clear key to what is intentional or unintentional, what is dominant or marginal, what is accessible to the general audience and what only to "professionals" who devoted a significant amount of time to delve into the film objects, one cannot leave these questions aside.

Inspiration sources for such a self-reflexive approach may stem from a discussion about what it means to encounter the "cinephiliac moment," "the fetishizing of fragments of a film, either individual shots or marginal (often unintentional) details in the image, especially those that appear only for a moment;" something that arises out of discernibly subjective cinematic experience.³⁷⁸ A tendency to be distracted by the slippery, peripheral, even accidental aspects of the cinematic image has been articulated by many theorists, perhaps most convincingly by those who linked this kind of haptic viewing experience with the history of cinephilia.³⁷⁹ Notably, Christian Keathley made this link explicit by stating that "an encounter with a cinephiliac moment is not just a visual experience, but also a more broadly sensuous one; it is an experience that has been repeatedly linked in critical writing to the haptic, the tactile, and the bodily."³⁸⁰ Whether it is "the gesture of a hand, the odd rhythm of a horse's gait, [...] the sudden change in expression on a face," or the proverbial "wind in the trees" that fascinated

³⁷⁸ Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 7.

³⁷⁹ Besides Keathley, see, for example: Roger Cardinal, "Pausing Over Peripheral Detail," *Framework*, no. 30–31 (1986), 112–130; Paul Willemen, "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); Barker, *The Tactile Eye*; André Habib, "Reel Changes: Post-mortem Cinephilia or the Resistance of Melancholia," in *Technology and Film Scholarship: Experience, Study, Theory*, ed. Santiago Hidalgo (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 79–100; Jordan Schonig, "The haecceity effect: on the aesthetics of cinephiliac moments," *Screen* 61, no. 2 (2020), 255–271.

³⁸⁰ Keathley, *Cinephilia and History*, 8.

the viewers of early Lumière films,³⁸¹ a cinephile is the chosen one to be pierced by these details. He or she is invited to an answer that does not arrive from an ex-post critical evaluation but resides in a time lag between the pathic stimulus that always comes too early to be processed and the response that always comes too late to be “completely at the height of experience” – something Bernhard Waldenfels terms “diastasis.”³⁸² Any attempt to make sense of this experience in critical/theoretical writing must not escape this revelatory encounter; instead, a cinephile should embrace, even fetishize, the fleeting and evanescent moments of the film and try to express the mysterious push-pull movement circulating between him/her and the object in similarly fleeting and evanescent words.

However, doubt remains whether such fetishization of cinephiliac moments as instances of “systemic excess”³⁸³ does not limit their potential to envision the film object in a new way. Championing the selected details as formal idiosyncrasies recognizable only to the chosen few risks cementing their marginal status, denying them to become full-fledged actors in reimagining the films they appear in. Speaking of Kříženecký’s films, elements such as color layers, static marks, or camera trembling may be contingent and surplus to the films’ narration and style. Yet, they are so ubiquitous and intrusive that spectators will not be able to ignore them – and the existing reception studies of early cinema suggest that even if some viewers found such deformations annoying, they certainly noticed them, or even confused them with the actual figurative content.³⁸⁴ In the case of Šváb’s disfigured face, although the stains and ruptures do not fit into our notion of discernible forms and figures, the contemporary audience will recall such moments from their visual memory. Associations coming to mind may involve late 19th century photographs of heightened emotional expressions,³⁸⁵ modern painting (see the possessed figures of Francis Bacon), experimental found footage films, or, indeed, the now almost ordinary experience of seeing someone’s face frozen and glitched in a Zoom window or deepfaked up to the point of unrecognizability.³⁸⁶ Thus, the cinephiliac

³⁸¹ Ibid., 7–8.

³⁸² Bernhard Waldenfels, *Phenomenology of the Alien* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011); Bernhard Waldenfels, “The Role of the Lived-Body in Feeling,” in *Rethinking Emotion*, eds. Rüdiger Campe and Julia Weber (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 245–263.

³⁸³ Jiří Anger and Tomáš Jirsa, “We Never Took Deconstruction Seriously Enough (On Affects, Formalism, and Film Theory): An Interview with Eugénie Brinkema,” *Illuminace* 31, no. 1 (2019), 67–68.

³⁸⁴ See, for example: Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

³⁸⁵ See, for instance, Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (New York: MIT Press, 2003).

³⁸⁶ Pietro Conte, “Mockumentality: From hyperfaces to deepfakes,” *World Literature Studies* 11, no. 4 (2019), 11–25; Yvonne Zimmermann, “Videoconferencing and the Uncanny Encounter with Oneself: Self-Reflexivity as

moment need to be conceived “not in terms of what [it] resist[s]” but as a “fundamental mode of experiencing the moving image,” as Jordan Schonig proposes.³⁸⁷ In other words, this positive understanding of cinephiliac moments allows us to perceive the diastasis between pathos and response as overfull with meaning, and not opposed to it. In other words, a meaning that is co-shaped by subjective factors yet is not reducible to them, and, at the same time, a meaning that may not be the most obvious one yet is difficult to ignore (whether in a negative or positive sense).

Still, even if we accept this framing, a more challenging question resurfaces. Provided that the cinephiliac moment turns into a more universal structure of film experience with actual contours and meanings, how to account for the transformations that the viewer and the film object undertake? Haptic analyses are riddled with affirmations of being lost in the Other and making the cinephile and his/her film object participate in a mutual becoming; however, it is rarely clear what exactly is changing about either of the parties. The moment of Sadie Benning sucking her thumb is saved from obscurity but remains a detail with no function or place in the video’s structure. Likewise, as anyone who follows Marks’s writing over time³⁸⁸ (not to mention her epigones), her experiencing embodied reactions and transcending the subject/object barrier constitutes a norm rather than a surprising deviation.

Perhaps the problem lies in the “unattainability” of film, notoriously addressed by Raymond Bellour:³⁸⁹ if writing about cinema cannot quite put the finger on the unique assemblage of images and sounds into movement, describing how an understanding of a single detail can reshape this multiplicity without intervening in the object itself becomes a doubly frustrating task. Now that the digital technology has made the film objects more accessible (albeit not necessarily attainable)³⁹⁰ and susceptible to manipulation, the cinephiliac moment can be expressed simultaneously in writing *about* film and writing *with* film, and thus endow the critic’s touch with transformative powers. However, should this touching turn into retouching, i.e., suturing out any disproportions between the film object and the subject’s imagination, or disproportions within the object itself, the crack-up will cease to function, so moderation and

Self-Monitoring 2.0,” in *Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory*, eds. Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini (Lüneburg: meson press, 2020), 99–103.

³⁸⁷ Schonig, “The haecceity effect,” 256.

³⁸⁸ See, for example Laura U. Marks, “Thinking Like a Carpet: Embodied Perception and Individuation in Algorithmic Media,” *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies* 7, no. 1 (2013), 7–20.

³⁸⁹ Raymond Bellour, “The Unattainable Text” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), 19–27.

³⁹⁰ Raymond Bellour, “35 Years Later: Is the “Text”, Once Again, Unattainable?,” in *Beyond the Essay Film*, eds. Julia Vassilieva and Deane Williams (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 33–48.

respect ought to come first and foremost. The following section attempts to provide tools to conceptualize how to walk this thin line.

5.2. The (Im)Possibility of Videographic Touching

In academic film theory, the idea of haptic intervention in its object of study already came in its golden age during the 1970s. Besides Raymond Bellour, who decided not to pursue the film object directly and rather thematized its fleetingness in self-reflexive writing,³⁹¹ Thierry Kuntzel went even further. The author of now canonical articles of semiotic/psychoanalytic film theory – “The Film-Work” (1972) and “The Film-Work 2” (1975) –³⁹² confronted “the impossibility of recovering through description and analysis the essential meaning and nature of the film-experience,”³⁹³ abandoned scholarly research, and turned to video art. We can already read in his early texts about “slowing or stopping [the film’s] movement (continuity) to gauge the immobility (discontinuity) which sustains it, isolating visual or aural motifs, confronting and comparing them by means of reverse motion,”³⁹⁴ under the guise of deconstructing the film as it is meant to be watched and revealing an underlying film-work that signifies its meanings. According to Kuntzel, it is the immediacy of analog video that actualizes this impulse, allowing us to touch the film object in a way that acknowledges its ongoing transformation and dialogue with individual and collective imagination. If the transposition of the film object from continuous movement into a complex, dynamic structure of interrelated building blocks substituted one system of meaning with another, Kuntzel’s “practical” research toned down the obsession with deciphering and experimented with what could emerge in-between movement and stasis, construction and deconstruction, the objective and the subjective. Ideally, the investigation should give birth to “another film” in which all sorts of images would unexpectedly mix, overlap, and transform each other – as in a memory.³⁹⁵

With the advent of mass digitization in the late 20th century, these dilemmas reemerged and resonated with interest in haptic visuality and the new cinephilia. What Thomas Elsaesser described as “the instability of the images put in circulation, their adaptability even in their

³⁹¹ See, for example: Raymond Bellour, “Analysis in Flames,” *Diacritics*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1985), 54–56.

³⁹² Thierry Kuntzel “The Film-Work,” *Enclitic 2*, no. 1 (1978), 38–61; Thierry Kuntzel, “The Film-Work 2,” *Camera Obscura 5*, no. 2 (1980), 6–70.

³⁹³ Hilary Radner and Alistair Fox, eds., *Raymond Bellour: Cinema and the Moving Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 35.

³⁹⁴ Kuntzel, “The Film-Work,” 40–41.

³⁹⁵ Raymond Bellour, “Thierry Kuntzel and the Return of Writing,” in *Between-the-Images*, eds. Raymond Bellour and Allyn Hardyck (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2012), 30–61.

visual forms and shapes, their mutability of meaning,³⁹⁶ provoked strong temptation to reframe and reshape films, according to a logic that would unite private idiosyncrasies of life-long cinephiles with contemporary theoretical and historical concerns. These trends in film theory, as well as practical inspiration from experimental found footage filmmakers such as Ken Jacobs, Matthias Müller, Peter Tscherkassky, or Peggy Ahwesh, whose interventions in film objects strived to marry poetic and analytical ambitions,³⁹⁷ had a significant impact on the birth of the “videographic essay” (also called “video essay” or “audiovisual essay”) format and the discipline of videographic film studies (or at least on certain tendencies in this field).³⁹⁸ Catherine Grant, one of the pioneering video essayists, articulated these influences in a manifesto called *Touching the Film Object?* (2011).³⁹⁹ The videographic essay is a remediation of Laura U. Marks’s article “Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes” (2004), letting its textual fragments find resonances with an iconic scene from Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966). A bespectacled boy who tries to decipher a blurry image on a screen in front of him becomes a metaphor for the haptic critic. No matter how much he is striving to approach the unattainable object, the heroines’ faces remain indiscernible. Due to Grant’s use of slow-motion effect and her refusal to show the end of the scene, the figures fail to lift off the grainy surface. Nevertheless, a close physical contact between the viewer and the film object has been established – one that does not promise resolution or meaning but binds them together in a state of mutual becoming. Whether this subtle transformation of a classic scene amounts to a coveted touch of the film object or bears witness to its impossibility is a question waiting to be addressed.

Grant’s approach is not a lone anomaly. Since the videographic film studies began taking shape, many initial leading figures such as Cristina Álvarez López, Adrian Martin, and

³⁹⁶ Thomas Elsaesser, “Cinephilia or the Uses of Disenchantment,” in *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*, eds. Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 38. See also: Jessica McGoff, “Expresser, Agitator, Salve and Mirror: the Video Essay and Contemporary Cinephilia,” (Master’s Thesis, Amsterdam University, 2017).

³⁹⁷ The relationship between experimental found footage and videographic film studies is covered, for example, in Manu Yáñez, “Thought, Action, and Imagination,” *The Audiovisual Essay*, 2013, accessed July 31, 2021, <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/audiovisualessay/frankfurt--papers/manu--yanez/>; See also Jennifer Proctor, “Teaching avant-garde practice as videographic research.” *Screen* 60, no. 3 (2019), 466–474.

³⁹⁸ These connections have been highlighted by Corey Creekmur, “How Does Film Feel? Toward Affective Videographic Criticism,” *The Cine-Files*, no. 10 (2016), accessed July 31, 2021, <http://www.thecine-files.com/how-does-film-feel2016/>; Tiago Baptista, “Lessons in Looking: Digital Audiovisual Essay” (PhD diss., Birkbeck, University of London, 2016), 142–169; McGoff, “Expresser, Agitator, Salve and Mirror”; Jiří Anger, “Médium, které myslí sebe sama: Audiovizuální esej jako nástroj bádání a vyústění akademických trendů.” *Illuminace* 30, no. 1 (2018), 5–27.

³⁹⁹ Catherine Grant, “Touching the Film Object? Notes on the ‘Haptic’ in Videographical Film Studies,” *Filmanalytical*, August 29, 2011, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://filmanalytical.blogspot.com/2011/08/touching-film-object-notes-on-haptic-in.html>.

Christian Keathley and also later practitioners like Johannes Binotto, Ian Garwood, or Jessica McGoff have been accentuating the value of material operations with digital film objects. Techniques like zoom in, pause, slow motion, split-screen, or glitch serve them to highlight audiovisual phenomena that are difficult to describe yet provoke intense sensations. The practitioners often emphasize that some of these phenomenal details become perceptible only through material interventions, by the affordances of video-editing software to disassemble film objects into the smallest working units that can be viewed in juxtapositions.⁴⁰⁰ In her reflection on the videographic essay *The VERTIGO of Anagnorisis* (2012), Catherine Grant states that it was only because of her video-editing program that she became aware of what brings Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and the fifth episode of *Star Wars* (*The Empire Strikes Back*; Irvin Kershner, 1980) together. Investigating the rhetorical strategy of anagnorisis, "the point in the plot, especially of a tragedy, at which the protagonist recognizes his or her or some other character's true identity or discovers the true nature of his or her own situation,"⁴⁰¹ she noticed the resonances between the films "after seeing thumbnail images from the chosen sequences juxtaposed in [her] video editor project library."⁴⁰² Arranging the scenes in a split-screen and selectively applying slow-motion and muting brings the films' deeper affinities and subtle dissonances to the fore. Symptomatically, the author is happy to mention that this revelation was "personally charged," recalling the fact that she associated the anagnorisis in both films with her own experience of finding out that the father who has raised her was not her biological parent.⁴⁰³ The videographic essay holds a cautious promise of answering Eugenie Brinkema's call to search for affect in formal and textual particularities instead of lengthy descriptions of embodied sensations,⁴⁰⁴ albeit without abandoning the

⁴⁰⁰ Catherine Grant, "Déjà-Viewing?: Videographic Experiments in Intertextual Film Studies," *Mediascape: UCLA's Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 7, no. 1 (2013), accessed July 31, 2021, http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Winter2013_DejaViewing.html; Shane Denson, "The Algorithmic Nickelodeon," *Medieninitiative*, June 22, 2019, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://medieninitiative.wordpress.com/2019/06/22/the-algorithmic-nickelodeon/>; Johannes Binotto, "In Lag of Knowledge," in *Practical Aesthetics*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 83–94; Ian Garwood, "From 'video essay' to 'video monograph'? Indy Vinyl as academic book," *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies* 9, no. 1 (2020), 5–29. For a more theoretical account, see David Colangelo, "Hitchcock, Film Studies, and New Media: The Impact of Technology on the Analysis of Film," in *Technology and Film Scholarship*, ed. Santiago Hidalgo (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 127–148.

⁴⁰¹ Quoted in the video essay Catherine Grant, "The VERTIGO of Anagnorisis," Vimeo, 2012, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/42963508>.

⁴⁰² Grant, "Déjà-Viewing?"

⁴⁰³ Ibid. This focus on subjective experience and private memories is becoming increasingly present in videographic film studies, see, for example, "Once Upon a Screen," *The Cine-Files*, no. 15 (2020), eds. Ariel Avissar and Evelyn Kreutzer, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.thecine-files.com/issue15-audiovisual-essays/>.

⁴⁰⁴ Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*. See also: Girish Shambu, "On Video Essays, Cinephilia, and Affect," *Girish*, July 7, 2014, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://girishshambu.net/2014/07/on-video-essays-cinephilia-and-affect.html>.

primacy of subjective film experience. Whether the main source of this affect lies in authorial subjectivity, specific material interventions, inner workings of the ever-changing film object, or hidden algorithmic processes is up for debate.⁴⁰⁵ For now, the most important thing is that touching the film object can be at least partially reconciled with the critical tradition of close reading.

The hitherto described examples stress that haptic intervention is primarily about excavating the idiosyncratic, hidden, lost, and ideally also intimate. The transformation is meant to be subtle, actualizing what has, in a way, always been there. This approach towards found footage resonates with my general approach towards the digitized films of Jan Kříženecký. The previous chapters indicated ways to develop the specific deformations in individual film moments further, extend the impulse that the respective forms of the crack-up turned into an aesthetically and speculatively generative mode of material thinking with archival images. Any haptic appropriation would come down to distinguishing and sculpting the crack-up rather than inventing it from scratch. Nonetheless, Digital Kříženecký requires more epistemological thinking on the part of the appropriator than the usual suspects of videographic film studies (Hollywood cinema, auteurist arthouse cinema, quality TV). Before one may say, “This is what I can do with the figures, objects, and places you all know,” “This is the detail within your favorite film you failed to notice,” or “This moment resonates with my deeply buried personal memories,” he/she needs to deal with the fact that we do not know what their default state is. Of course, *Persona* or *Star Wars* acquire a multitude of identities as digital files – being variously cropped, pixelated, even colored, as one DVDRip of Bergman’s film with a purplish layer I once possessed testifies – but in our memories and associations, they still gravitate towards visible and recognizable figuration. From the other side of the spectrum, the films of Bill Morrison in the digital space partake in curious processes of hybridization – with nitrate rot and data corruption overlapping – yet we are trained to accept their materiality as inherent to the artistic intention. In the case of Kříženecký, the cracked-up figures, which may understandably be seen as products of a cinephiliac imagination, are paradoxically the only things we can be sure of when we do not know the author’s aim nor how the physical deformations got into the images. When we decide to pursue these objects

⁴⁰⁵ See, for example Luka Arsenjuk, “to speak, to hold, to live by the image: Notes in the Margins of the New Videographic Tendency,” in *The Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics, Utopia*, eds. Elizabeth Papazian and Caroline Eades (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2016), 275–299; Jiří Anger, “Dotýkat se nedosažitelného objektu: Haptická audiovizuální esej a antropotechnický interface,” in *Operátoři (nových) médií*, ed. Tomáš Dvořák (forthcoming; Praha: Nakladatelství Akademie múzických umění, 2022). See also Chapter 6.

videographically, isolating the cracked-up figures and engaging them in complex trains of thought will not necessarily reveal hidden truths about the materials. However, it may persuade us that hardly graspable phenomena do not have to be conceived as excess or surplus – they can be the only anchors we have, as long as they are not allowed to disappear. By transposing the film object from a figurative or material modality into a cracked-up one, we inevitably transform it but also engage it in a subject-object entanglement that keeps the crack-up alive.

In comparison with other analyzed films from Kříženecký's oeuvre, Šváb's face in *Laughter and Tears* is probably closest to a highly coded, formalized, and ritualized form of cinema which cinephilia should target, at least according to Paul Willemen.⁴⁰⁶ "For it is only there that the moment of revelation or excess, a dimension other than that which is being programmed, becomes noticeable," he states.⁴⁰⁷ When looking at all the frames, though, only a minority of them does not entail intrusions of alien actors. Due to the existence of two transparent surfaces – the yellowish layer and the contours of Šváb's head – even the ordinary dots, dust, and scratches become more visible, not mentioning the assault presented by blotches and cuts in the more orange-to-red frames. Still, unlike experimental films, in which "you don't have a cinephiliac moment because it's no longer demarcatable [...] because the whole film tries to be it,"⁴⁰⁸ these distortions are too chaotic to constitute a system. Considering there is no safe place we would transform by touch, the stitched head in the most distorted frames may paradoxically start a pattern ready to be exploited videographically. This brings the haptic scholar into a double-edged position: on the one hand, he is invited to put the crack-up into the spotlight; on the other, he is warned that the crack-up does not exist because of him or entirely for him, and may eventually crumble before his eyes. Thus, paraphrasing Paolo Cherchi Usai, if the film archivist is like a "physician who has accepted the inevitability of death even while he continues to fight for the patient's life,"⁴⁰⁹ the haptic film scholar confronted with Digital Kříženecký is like a doctor easing his or her patients (aka the cracked-up film objects) towards this death being forever suspended. In other words, the haptic doctor keeps the patients eternally stuck in a moment before the death comes (as in Jorge Luis

⁴⁰⁶ Willemen, "Through the Glass Darkly," 238.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark Age* (London: BFI, 2001), 105.

Borges's short story "The Secret Miracle"),⁴¹⁰ without ever granting any of them resolution (either in figuration or abstraction).

This is how a haptic critic may approach Digital Kříženecký without losing face. Anyhow, more is to be done regarding the specificities of the vintage print of *Laughter and Tears*. Šváb's face is therefore investigated in a specific configuration within the spliced frames. As a result, the face is reconceived as a double landscape – the figurative one and the material one – wherein the aesthetic integrity of the crack-up depends on how the haptic subject understands the Hippocratic oath.

5.3. The Cinematic Face as the Frankenstein's Monster

As indicated in the chapter's introduction, the motifs that would lead one to relate haptic visuality, close-up, and the face are obvious enough and have been addressed from the earliest history of film theory. Pinpointing what is specific about Šváb's face in *Laughter and Tears* warrants finding a gap between the familiar narratives that unite facial close-ups with transparency and revelation on the one hand and with opacity and masking on the other. Stating that it lies somewhere between the two, in what Noa Steimatsky terms "singular binding of concealment and disclosure,"⁴¹¹ may be closest to the truth, yet without concretization, it could reek of relativism. Instead, one should ask questions: How can a face so dedicated to reproducing universal, all-recognizable emotions end up stuck in a state in which it is impossible to tell where does the laughter ends and where do the tears begin? How can a close-up shot scanned and rendered in 4K reveal more of the details that seemingly decompose the face from without than of the details hidden within the actor's face? How can the haptic subject mold the close-up to approach the crack-up that arises from these ambiguities without deflecting either of these four parts of the equation – emotional states, affective transitions, material details, figurative details – in favor of the other?

In addressing these questions, one idea is instructive: the close-up of Šváb's face is not the only close-up we can see. And I am not having in mind the (now firmly established) notion that the close-up shot is not exclusive to faces and can just as well reveal or mask hidden

⁴¹⁰ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Secret Miracle," in *Ficciones* (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 143–150.

⁴¹¹ Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20.

particularities of cinematic objects.⁴¹² The inspiration comes from Kim Knowles – in the third chapter of her recent monograph, *Experimental Film and Photochemical Practices* (2020), she investigates “surface intervention as a form of cinematic close-up.”⁴¹³ In the works of artists such as Vicky Smith or Charlotte Pryce who manipulate directly with the film strip, “the close-up finds a new expressive dimension, tied not, as is traditionally the case, to the magnifying properties of the camera, but to the mechanical relationship between the film surface and the film projector.”⁴¹⁴ Instead of exteriorizing the slightest changes of facial micro-physiognomy, what is revealed is the vibrant life of non-human agents, whose textures become more pronounced and make the traditional perspectival reference points fall away.⁴¹⁵ Regarding *Laughter and Tears*, someone who wants to touch the film object in a transformative way is definitely not as free – the world of micro-organisms that fills the Lumière film stock ravishes the figurative landscape whether he/she wants it or not, and the digitization made it even more complicated. While Vicky Smith at least dictates the initial terms of which parts of the image will be considered details and which will not, the appropriator of Kříženecký’s film has no such possibility. He/she cannot manufacture them, cannot always tell their exact origin, even cannot be so sure that the physical deformations resurfacing in the digital files are merely details. The most “haptic” thing he can do is to caress the film frame by frame – both individually and as part of a mosaic – and search for images in which the magnifying properties of the camera and the film surface join forces in a most surprising way. As Bernhard Waldenfels notes, “pathos is surprise par excellence,”⁴¹⁶ and maybe the astonishment from the synergy of two close-ups, two roads towards the overlooked and peripheral, is the very thing that titillates the haptic imagination.

⁴¹² See, for example Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (London: The Athlone Press, 1986), 102–110; Francesco Casetti, “Objects on the Screen: Tools, Things, Events,” in *Cinematographic Objects: Things and Operations*, ed. Volker Pantenburg (Berlin: August Verlag, 2015), 25–43; James Leo Cahill, *Zoological Surrealism: The Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 31–92. This idea was also exploited by experimental filmmakers such as Matthias Müller, Christoph Girardet, or Morgan Fisher.

⁴¹³ Kim Knowles, *Experimental Film and Photochemical Practices* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 18.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴¹⁶ Waldenfels, “The Role of Lived Body in Feeling,” 251.

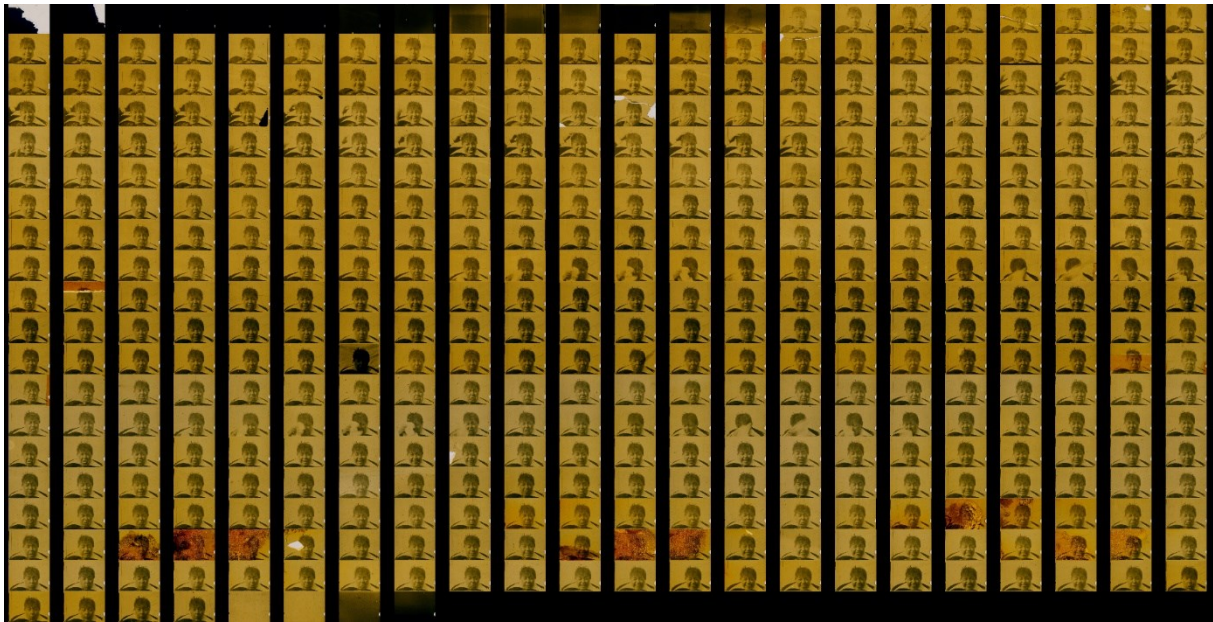
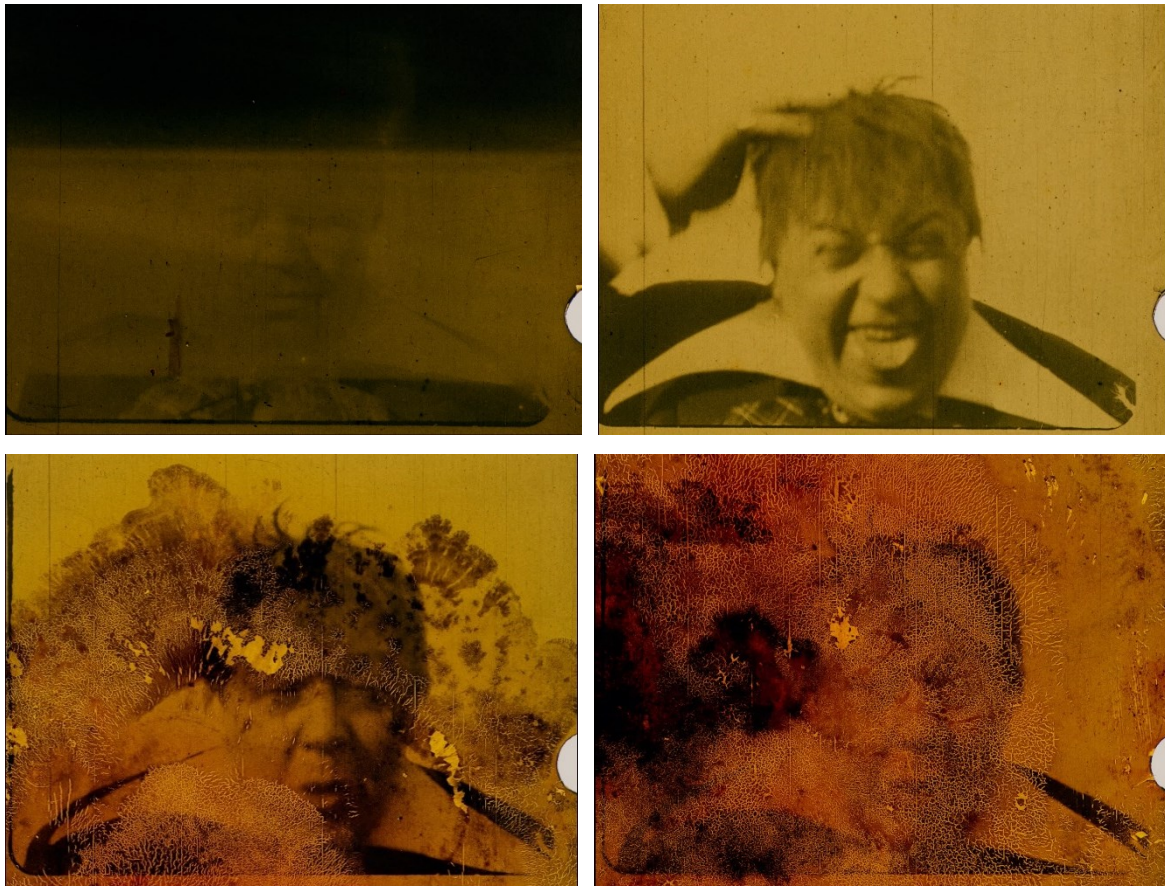


Figure 5.5: *Laughter and Tears* (Smích a pláč; 1898, source: nitrate print) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

By scanning all the frames in a “haptic mosaic,” (Fig. 5.5) in which the mobile eye is allowed to roam over all the bricks that constitute the building of film,⁴¹⁷ one can distinguish four patterns. The first one (Fig. 5.6) involves pictures in which figurative contours of the face are not yet or no longer discernible. These come at the beginning and the end of the film strip, and for the current purpose we abstract from them. The second, most frequent one (Fig. 5.7) entails frames that show Šváb’s face in relatively distinct outlines, covered by a yellow layer and disturbed by mechanical damages and dirt of a smaller order. Again, in the pursuit of the regime which puts the two forms of the close-up together, besides providing context for the deformations, they are for now analytically disposable. The third one (Figs. 5.8–5.9) consists of the actor’s face being swallowed by large blobs of bacteria and fungi, with its double surface of the face and the yellowish-orange layer dissipating into hundreds of microorganisms that open up tiny holes and branched paths of escape. This configuration aptly demonstrates the fragility of the laughing/crying face and the whole mode of seeing that the close-up enacts. Notwithstanding, it also resembles the logic already investigated in some of the previous chapters to the extent that it does not require further elaboration.

⁴¹⁷ Cardinal. “Pausing Over Peripheral Detail”; Catherine Grant and Amber Jacobs, “Persona Non Grata Sonata,” *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture* 1, no. 1 (2018), accessed July 31, 2021, <http://maifeminism.com/persona-non-grata-sonata>.



Figures 5.6–5.9: *Laughter and Tears* (Smích a pláč; 1898, source: nitrate print) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

As intriguing as the blobs are, perhaps the most original pattern is the fourth one (Figs. 5.10–5.13). It includes images that are stitched together, usually involving two segments – the yellow one and the orange one – and producing, among other things, fascinating configurations in which Šváb’s head appears to be torn. The visible splice as a physical joining of two separate pieces of film liberates the images from mere representation and reconceives them within the cinematic process. It “becomes simultaneously the interruptive and the facilitator of a form of continuity,”⁴¹⁸ yet stages this continuity on the basest level of cinematic signification – the frame. In the spliced frames in *Laughter and Tears*, Josef Šváb-Malostranský is turning into a Frankenstein’s monster, a head full of stitches which confuses us whether what we are seeing is still the well-known human actor or only his gestalt that was reassembled by technology into a different entity. His crying grimace freezes in a grotesque resignation to forces that shatter the dream of being captured on film to pieces. What remains is a divided surface where the individual parts no longer constitute the same plane of

⁴¹⁸ Peter Gidal, *Materialist Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 108.

existence yet, curiously, do not disintegrate but still hold together. The close-up of the actor's face now presents a deindividualized head, reminiscent of Francis Bacon's tortured figures. As Gilles Deleuze said regarding Bacon's paintings, "For the face is a structured, spatial organization that conceals the head, whereas the head is dependent upon the body, even if it is the point of the body, its culmination. It is not that the head lacks spirit; but it is a spirit in bodily form, a corporeal and vital breath, an animal spirit."⁴¹⁹ Hence, by means of the splices, the explicit materiality of film starts to unveil the hidden materiality of the close-up – the face turns into a "piece of flesh,"⁴²⁰ hardly discernible from the flesh of filmic matter. Nevertheless, what kind of figure does the alternative, "Knowlesian" close-up in the form of splice mean? How can something that sutures fragments that were disassembled or torn apart back into a seamless whole become a thing that disturbs and disrupts?



Figures 5.10–5.13: *Laughter and Tears* (Smích a pláč; 1898, source: nitrate print) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

⁴¹⁹ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 20.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

The facial close-up certainly has a history of inducing positive as well as negative emotions,⁴²¹ and James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) does not accomplish this ambiguity solely due to its emergence at the turn of the sound era. As Robert Spadoni comments, "the distorting and enervating effects of the early sound film close-up become the concrete attributes of one diegetic subject, regardless both of the distance between it and the camera and of the level of a viewer's medium awareness."⁴²² The inert, teflon-like head of the creature became a projection screen for the spectator's uncertainty about the human-machine assemblage that each close-up inevitably was, particularly in liminal periods of film history.⁴²³ In this process, it was able to make the viewer more susceptible to the medium and at the same time pull him towards the image's surface to be convinced by his or her own "haptic" look how thick the filmic reality is. The monster's head can, then, be understood as a place where the two close-ups – that of the face and that of the medium/head – unite. However, the digitized *Laughter and Tears* allows us to touch the crack-up by making the two close-ups co-present yet visibly distinct. In *Frankenstein*, the medium was perceived as structuring context and dispositif, a cipher for transition between silent and sound cinema, here it changes into an intrusive cut that rearranges the surface without damaging or destroying its unity. The splice reminds us not only that the close-up is a strange space on the verge of the human and the technological, but that the very capability of its content and carrier to hold the image together in a recognizable configuration is always open for reassessment. Once a film frame gets torn apart, even the best splice in the world cannot hide that the film becomes something else. Nevertheless, as we do not know the origin of the splice, we cannot imagine the frame without it, and, consequently, the splice is the only thing that stands as a close-up of the inevitable mutability and malleability of the frame. Remember Walter Murch's classic comparison of editing with surgery: "The 'patient' is pinned to the slab and: whack! Either/Or! This not That! In or Out! We chop up the poor film in a miniature guillotine then stick the dismembered pieces together like Dr Frankenstein's monster."⁴²⁴ *Laughter and Tears* proves that this logic may apply not only to the classical montage but to the assemblage of the film's smallest units as well.

⁴²¹ For example, Yuri Tsivian describes expressions of shock and disgust at the graphic ugliness and gigantism of close-up faces in the reception of early Russian cinema. Tsivian, *Early Russian Cinema and its Reception*, 154–156.

⁴²² Robert Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies: The Coming of Film and the Origins of the Horror Genre* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2007), 103.

⁴²³ Shane Denson, *Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface* (Berlin: Transcript Verlag, 2014), 379–402.

⁴²⁴ Walter Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing* (Los Angeles: Silman James Press, 1992), 57.

Again, someone who wants to shape the crack-up between the two close-ups would be advised not to satisfy himself/herself with dwelling on the splices' magic nor to replace the individual parts at will. Inspiration can come from a Frankensteinian film par excellence, Michael Fleming's experimental found footage film *Never Never Land* (2018). The work aims to deconstruct "our obsession with physical perfection, our domination and wanting to control everything"⁴²⁵ – including our bodies and faces. For this reason, Fleming creates composite images that are stitched from two or more image fragments yet still look as if they complete each other. However, this correspondence is itself undermined by inserting or uncovering visible seams between the parts. The faces from family photo albums we used to know no longer exist as distinguished wholes: to make sense, they need to be reassembled, and, at the same time, they should not be camouflaged as originals and affirm their composite character. Thus, the close-up-in-film and the close-up-of-film are simultaneously put together yet kept apart, embracing the always-already-sutured character of the cinematic body. The surgical touch of Josef Šváb-Frankensteinský's face can follow in this film's steps.

5.4. Coda: The Perks of Touching the Untouchable

The reflection on the epistemic preconditions of touching fragmentary, distorted, and altogether weird film objects such as the digitized nitrate print of *Laughter and Tears* comes to an end. Its conclusions are ever provisional, but it should be clear that some of the established principles of haptic criticism – namely intentional fallacy and negative ontology – will no longer suffice. First, as the existing clouds of rot, fungicidal paths, and Frankensteinian stitches emerged regardless of what was purposefully put into the images by the artist or any other human agent, Šváb's face is difficult to fetishize, and thus cannot evoke the identification mechanisms that would ease us into thinking that we have been chosen by the film object. Second, the peculiar deformations encroaching upon Šváb's head 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 – or, more precisely, two forms of the close-up (one figurative, one material). The clashes between these two modalities make for the most intensive variations of the crack-up which do not lead to rupture or destruction but create new potent figures such as the stitched

⁴²⁵ Michael Fleming, "Never Never Land," Vimeo, 2018, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/234667905>.

head of Frankensteinian proportions. Altogether, this investigation demonstrated how relative categories such as figuration and materiality, human and technological, continuity and discontinuity, or detail and whole can be, and how anyone who wants to intervene in the cracked-up film objects needs to do it with surgical caution.

If anyone wanted to pursue these principles in a videographic form, he/she has been offered inspiration, particularly from essays by Catherine Grant and experimental found footage films such as *Never Never Land*. Whether analog, digital, or hybrid, these works anticipated or directly approached the problem of shaping the unshapeable and embraced the specific distortions of their reference film objects for their hidden poetic and analytical potential. Still, to create a videographic work that marries haptic and self-reflexive impulses with scholarly analysis, it is necessary to develop a more structured, systematic approach. One that injects the idiosyncratic crack-up of the materials with theoretical notions that point towards something more general about the film medium in the digital interface, and something that would be common for a larger family of archival films in the digital space. How such an approach could look like and how it could be applied to Kříženecký's digitized body of work as a whole is outlined in the last chapter.

6. Shaping the Unshapeable?

Videographic Deformation and the First Frames of Czech Cinema

January 2022. The spectators are finally able to watch all the first Czech films on the Internet. However, what if the real beginning of Czech cinema resided in images we fail to grasp? The continuous movement of film, further smoothed by digital transfer, masks the individual building blocks out of which it is assembled. Deconstructing the films into fragments in our software can help, yet the thing that sparks the initial sensation risks being overlooked in the big picture. This is why we need THE FIRST FRAMES OF CZECH CINEMA.

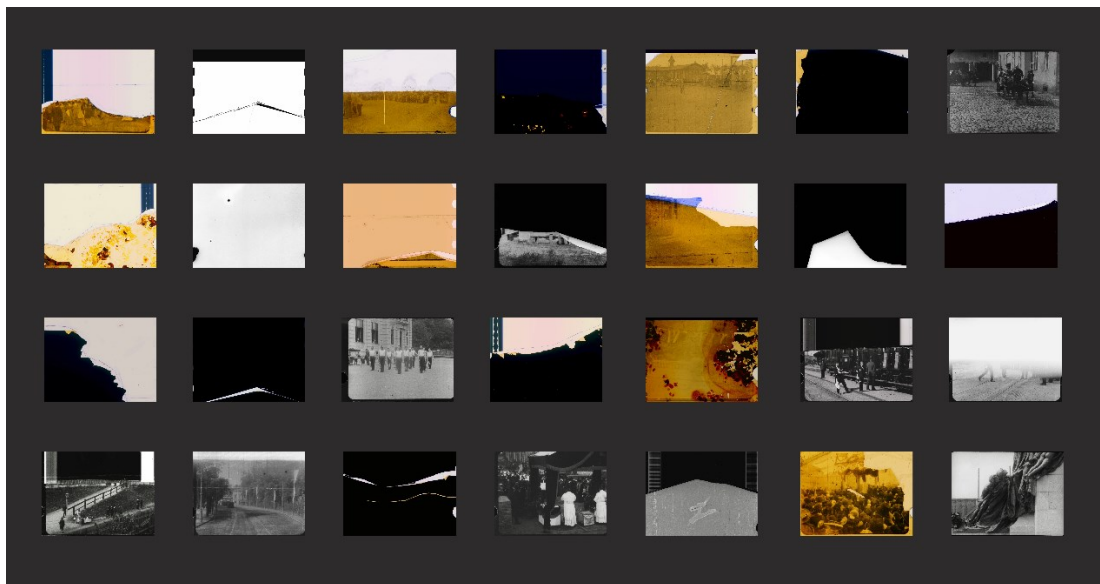


Figure 6.1: The first frames of all Kříženecký's films that were digitized from the original nitrate carriers (1898–1911, source: vintage prints and original negatives), © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

Previous chapters stipulated many problems of curation and appropriation of archival films with specific forms of the crack-up, but how to present the entire corpus of Digital Kříženecký in a manner that highlights its cracked-up character as a whole? It is one thing to digitize the films, sort them into categories, provide contextual information, and eventually research their figurative and material idiosyncrasies, but how to develop a (counter)narrative that would foreground the inherently fragmentary and unstable character of cinematic firsts, without turning this fact into a fetish or an alibi? The DVD / Blu-ray collection *The Films of Jan Kříženecký*, published in late 2019 by the National Film Archive (Národní filmový

archiv) in Prague and curated by the author of these lines,⁴²⁶ strived to marry respectful cataloging and contextualization of the materials with “reflecting the process and the incompleteness of analog fragments” – what Michael Loebenstein terms “presentation with seams.”⁴²⁷ Still, it was relatively tame regarding the importance of the crack-up in structuring and re-structuring our experience of the films. The unfamiliar and destabilizing elements such as the color veil, static marks, or camera trembling but also more common mechanical and chemical damages and ellipses were documented and demonstrated by Jeanne Pommeau.⁴²⁸ Up to this point, these “absences, imperfections, and discontinuities” were taken as “crucial concepts and methodological coordinates rather than obstacles to be overcome or resolved,” in the vein of Katherine Groo’s bad film histories project.⁴²⁹ Now it is time to experiment with practical forms of presentation in which this potential shall be unleashed, in which the so-called imperfections shall participate in envisioning the whole of Digital Kříženecký as always already cracked-up.

The goal of this chapter is not to delve into a general issue of curating early archival artifacts in the digital space, which would demand thorough demarcation of the field in international comparison⁴³⁰ and deeper knowledge of how Kříženecký’s films circulated in the past and how they will fare in the online landscape.⁴³¹ Rather, it proposes a practical exercise that imagines a specific crack-up that could bring all of the films together. As indicated in the opening paragraph, this exercise concerns itself with the very first images of Kříženecký’s films (excluding the artificially added opening titles). Not counting the three compilations assembled from various (usually later-generation) materials and the recently found nitrate

⁴²⁶ Jiří Anger, ed., *Filmy Jana Kříženeckého / The Films of Jan Kříženecký* (DVD / Blu-ray, Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2019).

⁴²⁷ Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis, Alexander Horwath and Michael Loebenstein, eds., *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace* (Wien: Synema – Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2008), 203.

⁴²⁸ Jeanne Pommeau, “The Digitisation of Jan Kříženecký’s Films,” in *Filmy Jana Kříženeckého / The Films of Jan Kříženecký*, ed. Jiří Anger (DVD / Blu-ray Booklet, Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2019), 31–35; Jeanne Pommeau, “The Digitisation of Kříženecký’s Films [videocommentary],” in *Filmy Jana Kříženeckého / The Films of Jan Kříženecký*, ed. Jiří Anger (DVD / Blu-ray, Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2019).

⁴²⁹ Katherine Groo, *Bad Film Histories: Ethnography and the Early Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

⁴³⁰ See, for example: C. G. Olesen, “Film History in the Making” (PhD diss., Amsterdam University, 2017). This issue was also a topic of a panel discussion between Jeanne Pommeau, Elif Rongen, Matěj Strnad, and me on the occasion of A Season of Classic Films. “A Season of Classic Films | Where, How and to Whom – the challenges of presenting earliest cinema,” June 3, 2021, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.filmovyprehled.cz/cs/kalendar/detail/a-season-of-classic-films-where-how-and-to-whom-the-challenges-of-presenting-earliest-cinema>.

⁴³¹ The films of Jan Kříženecký will be made available on the NFA online platform “Kontexty” (Contexts) in late January 2022. Research on the circulation of the first Czech films is currently being undertaken at the National Film Archive in Prague.

print of *Escorting the Cradle of František Palacký from Hodslavice to the Prague Exhibition Grounds* (Přenesení kolébky Františka Palackého z Hodslavic na Výstaviště; 1898, source: modern print),⁴³² there are 28 known original film materials (21 films) that survived. As soon as each of these fragments starts playing, its opening frame appears, but only in a fleeting, almost imperceptible form – before we are able to process it, it disappears and gives way to all the fascinating clashes between figuration and materiality from the earlier chapters. Considering we strive for an imaginative return to the grassroots of cinema, the first frames of the films, or at least what remained of them after all the years of decay, cannot be ignored. As they were the first images that appeared during screening, waiting for the “sudden transformation from still image to moving illusion” that came as the cranking began,⁴³³ and also the first images that ran through the printer, they might be considered the actual cinematic firsts. The digitization has only broadened this invisible primacy, as the first frames were also the first images that passed through the 4K scanner. To make these images visible again, with all their complicated and often contradictory histories at play, a videographic essay seems like an appropriate format.

The videographic essay – titled *The First Frames of Czech Cinema* – takes the form of a quasi-compilation that shows all the 28 first frames both individually and as part of a larger mosaic. The aim of this written accompaniment is not to describe what happens in that essay but to provide methodological background, analyze the essay’s epistemological implications, and find out what knowledge about the individual frames and, more generally, about a transversal crack-up of Digital Kříženecký the videographic exercise offers us. For this purpose, the following lines are dedicated first to a tendency in videographic film studies called “deformative criticism,” which “strives to make the original work strange in some unexpected way, deforming it unconventionally to reveal aspects that are conventionally obscured in its normal version and discovering something new from it.”⁴³⁴ This approach resonates with the intention behind *The First Frames of Czech Cinema*, which involves breaking the films into archives of images and extracting the individual frames according to a pattern that does not depend on their content but on them being the first images in the

⁴³² As of the time when this dissertation is being written, this print is still waiting to be digitized.

⁴³³ Tom Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator,” in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 741.

⁴³⁴ Jason Mittell, “Videographic Criticism as a Digital Humanities Method,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, eds. Matthew Gold and Lauren Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), accessed July 31, 2021, <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-f2acf72c-a469-49d8-be35-67f9ac1e3a60/section/b6dea70a-9940-497e-b7c5-930126fbd180>.

respective films. In order to explain the relevance of this approach, its potentialities, as well as limitations, must be addressed. The second part focuses on the videographic essay itself, by investigating the epistemic conditions of shaping the first frames and assembling them into a larger unit and provisionally indicating the findings we obtain (or do not obtain) by treating the materials in this way. If the transversal crack-up we search for emerges, we can speculate how it can help us see Digital Kříženecký through its perspective.

6.1. Breaking the Film Object

The hitherto undertaken examinations of Kříženecký's films always involved deconstruction or breakage of the respective texts. Whether they were individual frames selected according to a pattern (*Spring Races* in Chapter 2, *Laughter and Tears* in Chapter 2), a succession of frames in which a pattern unfolded (*Grand Consecration* in Chapter 1, *Assignment* in Chapter 4), or an animated GIF that made a pattern discernible in movement (*Opening Ceremony* in Chapter 3), the forms that emerged were no longer pure instruments applied to find hidden meanings. By dissecting the digitized artifacts and gathering their individual units into configurations that make the crack-up visible and speculatively generative, the initial film objects transformed into something else. These new entities reveal motifs enclosed within the original artifacts, yet they also defamiliarize them, make them "stranger than strange."⁴³⁵ Furthermore, the GIFs and frames can stand on their own as genuinely cracked-up film objects that circulate partially independently of the originals and may enter new chains of production – for example, the videographic essays proposed at the end of each chapter.

Still, would it be possible to make a deformative intervention that would be less instrumental? What certain practitioners of videographic film studies term "deformative criticism"⁴³⁶ (or also "parametric approach")⁴³⁷ allows us to imagine a situation in which, to quote Mark Sample, "the deformed work is the end, not the means to the end."⁴³⁸ Inspired by a literary-theory manifesto "Deformance and Interpretation" (1999) by Lisa Samuels and Jerome

⁴³⁵ The Audiovisual Essayist, "Making It Stranger than Strange," YouTube, 2020, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pajDSY05zg0>.

⁴³⁶ One of the formative events for deformative criticism in videographic film studies was the 2017 Society for Cinema and Media Studies Workshop "Deformative Criticism and Digital Experimentation in Film and Media Studies." See Shane Denson, "Deformative Criticism at #SCMS17," *medieinitiative*, February 16, 2017, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://medieninitiative.wordpress.com/2017/02/16/deformative-criticism-at-scms17/>.

⁴³⁷ Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell and Catherine Grant, eds., *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy* (Scalar, 2019), accessed July 31, 2021, <http://videographicessay.org/works/videographic-essay/index>.

⁴³⁸ Mark Sample, "Notes towards a Deformed Humanities," *samplerreality*, May 2, 2012, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://samplerreality.com/2012/05/02/notes-towards-a-deformed-humanities/>.

McGann, deformative criticism does not ask “what does [the work of art] mean” but “how do we release or expose [its] possibilities of meaning?”⁴³⁹ Rather than diving into the depths of a single film text, the approach aims to shift the rules of the game, distort the film and how we usually perceive it – whether in continuous flow or even frame by frame – and transform it into a new aesthetic and scholarly object. Samuels and McGann paved the way by demonstrating what strategies such as reordering, isolating, altering, and adding can do to Wallace Stevens’s poems.⁴⁴⁰ Videographic researchers such as Jason Mittell, Kevin L. Ferguson, or Alan O’Leary experiment with various kinds of software – both classic editing programs like Adobe Premiere or Final Cut and specialized image processing programs (ImageJ)⁴⁴¹ – to break their objects of study and “generate heretical and non-normative readings of media texts.”⁴⁴² For example, Jason Mittell’s project “Deformin’ in the Rain” (2019–2020) subjects the classic musical *Singin’ in the Rain* (1954) to more than twenty deformations, from traditional techniques like looping and slow-motion through unusual spatial montage (scaled triptych, moving frame, and other tactics) to re-arranging all the shots ascending by length or presenting the sum of the film’s frames as a barcode.⁴⁴³ As the author stated previously, such processes of discovery and experimentation in themselves constitute research, enabling us to “break the seal that binds a film as a finished work” and see it from a myriad of possible and impossible angles.⁴⁴⁴

To make the outcome less predictable, the deformative approach is often also parametric or “algorithmic,” whether in the narrow sense of operating according to a computerized step-based procedure or in the broader sense of subjecting a work to one or more generative constraints or parameters.⁴⁴⁵ Samuels and McGann already mention “reading backward” as a critical method that “turns off the controls that organize the poetic system at some of its most

⁴³⁹ Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann, “Deformance and Interpretation.” *New Literary History* 30, no. 1 (1999), 28.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 37–45.

⁴⁴¹ For more information about the creative use of ImageJ software, see, for example: Kevin L. Ferguson, “Slices of Cinema: Digital Transformation as Research Strategy,” in *The Arclight Guide to Media History and the Digital Humanities*, eds. Charles R. Acland and Eric Hoyt (Sussex: REFRAME, 2016), 270–299 or Kevin L. Ferguson, “Digital Surrealism: Visualizing Walt Disney Animation Studios,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (2017), accessed July 31, 2021, <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/11/1/000276/000276.html>.

⁴⁴² Denson, “Deformative Criticism at #SCMS17.”

⁴⁴³ Jason Mittell, “Deformin’ in the Rain: How (and Why) to Break a Classic Film,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (2021), accessed July 31, 2021, <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/15/1/000521/000521.html>.

⁴⁴⁴ Mittell, “Videographic Film Criticism as a Digital Humanities Method.”

⁴⁴⁵ Alan O’Leary, “No Voiding Time. A Deformative Videoessay,” *16:9*, September 30, 2019, accessed July 31, 2021, <http://www.16-9.dk/2019/09/no-voiding-time/>.

general levels” and yields results we cannot predict in advance.⁴⁴⁶ Similarly, many videographic practitioners deform films by succumbing them to a set of standardized procedures from which there can be no (or minimal) deviation and whose outcome should be (at least to the highest possible extent) down to chance.⁴⁴⁷ This is particularly the case of Mittell’s various re-arrangements of *Singin’ in the Rain* – for example, the exercise in which he re-organizes the entire film by ascending length of shots or a videographic version of Nicholas Rombes’s “10/40/70” project which juxtaposes three still frames from a feature film, from the arbitrary 10, 40, and 70 minute marks, and then analyses what these images signify in terms of the fictional work and on their own.⁴⁴⁸ The parametric approach presents a useful counterpoint to certain excesses of haptic criticism, especially to its preconception that the film object exists for us and can be manipulated at will to reflect our subjective experience. Its treatment of source materials as “archives of sounds and images”⁴⁴⁹ is a way of accepting that the film object is never entirely what we want it to be and may potentially lead to serious questioning of what kind of object we are really “touching” in the software interface. What makes the supposedly unique configurations of the crack-up encountered in Digital Kříženecký thus far stand out among others? Could it be possible that these moments have been overrated because of my pre-selective intentional filter? Although I believe the answer is “no,” the deformative/parametric approach I selected for *The First Frames of Czech Cinema* allows me to test whether there may be a crack-up that is less arbitrary and more distributed across the digitized body of work.

Be that as it may, deformative criticism naturally has its own epistemic shortcomings that should be briefly addressed. First and foremost, the film as an archive of sounds and images is not asymptomatic – it emerges in software designed to keep the user under the illusion of control. The software interface gives us numerous options to combine and manipulate images and sounds, yet the available operations are pre-structured to enhance our power to possess films, making them as decipherable and effective as possible.⁴⁵⁰ If we open the film in an ordinary media player such as VLC, our ability to manipulate images and sounds already presupposes that film is an attainable object adjusted to our needs of controlling time and

⁴⁴⁶ Samuels and McGann, “Deformance and Interpretation,” 36.

⁴⁴⁷ David Verdeure, “Deformative vs Performative,” *Filmscalpel*, 2019, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.filmscalpel.com/performative-vs-deformative/>.

⁴⁴⁸ Nicholas Rombes, *10/40/70: Constraint as Liberation in the Era of Digital Film Theory* (New York: Zero Books, 2014).

⁴⁴⁹ Mittell, “Videographic Film Criticism as Digital Humanities Method.”

⁴⁵⁰ For these reasons, Laura Mulvey speaks of a digital film spectator as “possessive spectator.” Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 161–180.

ready at hand to deliver audiovisual presence that masks the formatting processes active in the background (besides occasional glitches and buffers).⁴⁵¹ When we proceed towards working with the film in video-editing software, our capacity to watch two or more images simultaneously, switching automatically between the viewing and editing windows, lures us into seeing all images as mutually connected, even if they are not (at least not necessarily). Furthermore, we are free to examine the individual images/frames in microscopic detail, yet the images themselves are always full of information. No matter how torn, decayed, or destroyed they are, they are the same rectangles filled with pixels – absence turns into presence.

As a result, whereas haptic criticism toys with mistaking the subjective for the (quasi)objective, deformative criticism risks confusing the objective with the (quasi)subjective – two sides of the same coin. Fetishization again enters into play, this time in a belief that importing our favorite film into Adobe Premiere and subjecting it to a finite number of universally available operations will automatically yield ways of seeing it from surprising or even non-human perspectives. As our freedom in shaping the moving images in programs such as Adobe Premiere, Final Cut, or iMovie is getting bigger and bigger, technologies grow more and more sophisticated methods to pre-structure our choices, maneuvering us into cleverly delimited ways of seeing. In the worst scenario, we get to perceive the film object not through the eyes of the program but how the Program wants us to perceive it – as a carefully designed and entirely replaceable consumer product lost in an endless play of clicks and pop-up windows. Thus, anyone who wants to exploit editing software’s unique creative and scholarly potentialities must be wary of succumbing to a game in which, according to Vilém Flusser, “every virtuality, even the least probable, will be realized of necessity if the game is played for a sufficiently long time.”⁴⁵² Rather, one should think about the conditions of its production, the complex interface between human intervention and technological automatism.

Of course, what I describe is an extreme position, and many deformative critics try to answer the approach’s limitations in both theory and practice.⁴⁵³ Nevertheless, these epistemic

⁴⁵¹ Shane Denson, *Discorrelated Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 56–63.

⁴⁵² Vilém Flusser, “Our Program,” in Vilém Flusser, *Post-History* (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2013), 22.

⁴⁵³ See, for example: Alan O’Leary, “Workshop of Potential Scholarship: Manifesto for a parametric videographic criticism,” *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies* 11, no. 1 (2021), 75–98. A more general debate on the shortcomings of the parametric approach also sparked between the attendants of videographic

difficulties remind us that depending solely on artificial intelligence, especially the relatively primitive one encountered in standard user software, will most likely not break the film object in a way that would bring surprising outcomes. To inject the deformative with the performative,⁴⁵⁴ the critic/theorist does not necessarily have to deviate from the prescribed protocol. A self-reflexive and performative gesture may lie in the selection of the source material itself or, more specifically, in choosing a film object that is, in a way, always already deformed, unsure whether it even constitutes an object. Not a familiar Hollywood or arthouse film that needs an enlightened critic and potent software to make it strange, nor an experimental found footage film that is already coded as intentionally defamiliarizing. The digitized films of Jan Kříženecký can constitute such an object, even more so when we focus on the fact that their most basic building blocks – the individual frames – are the most unstable and undefinable elements. *The First Frames of Czech Cinema* pursues to become an exercise in deformative criticism, but one that puzzles the outcome as well as the output, and one that does not let the algorithmic protocol have the final say on which perspective we should take.

6.2. Frames Caught Between Then and Now

Hannah Frank's call for "studying a building not by walking its hallways or perusing its blueprints, but by examining each of its bricks"⁴⁵⁵ can reach out towards practical research as well. For the quantity of deformative operations we have at our disposal, we often forget about the nuances of the materials we want to deform. Although many videographic works pay attention to a single scene, the analytic or interpretive aim is usually related to its content, not to the material construction that shapes the individual image as a film object. Inspiration may come from videographic essays by Johannes Binotto, which are certainly not parametric/algorithmic in the vein of Mittell's or O'Leary's works but share a broader goal of dismantling the film object to make it strange.⁴⁵⁶ Binotto demonstrates how "lingering on the small and particular" can counter the "habit of clicking and swiping through films, clips and

workshops at Middlebury College: "Becoming Videographic Critics: A Roundtable Conversation," in *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy*, eds. Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant (Scalar, 2019), accessed July 31, 2021, <http://videographicessay.org/works/videographic-essay/becoming-videographic-critics-a-roundtable-conversation?path=contents>.

⁴⁵⁴ Verdeure, "Deformative vs Performative."

⁴⁵⁵ Hannah Frank, *Frame by Frame: A Materialist Aesthetics of Animated Cartoons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 1.

⁴⁵⁶ See, for example: Johannes Binotto, "Touching Sound," *Schnittstellen*, February 2, 2018, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://schnittstellen.me/2018/02/02/touching-sound/>, or Johannes Binotto, "Trace," *Schnittstellen*, 2020, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://schnittstellen.me/videoessays/trace/>.

images as swiftly as possible,” which “follows completely the capitalist logic of quick and smooth consumption.”⁴⁵⁷ In a rhetoric partly recalling haptic criticism and the new cinephilia, he asks: “What multiplicity is there hidden in just one film moment, in just one audiovisual fragment, in one image, one sound?”⁴⁵⁸ *The First Frames of Czech Cinema* pushes this idea in a more parametric direction, asking what if this singular fragment was not a specific image but any image that follows a specific protocol. This way, a game-changing detail may spring out of a whole corpus of visual elements without privileging one picture over the other.

The protocol for the essay was based on a now firmly established fact that the earliest film projections were not all about movement. Tom Gunning’s famous article “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator” (1989) points out that “in the earliest Lumière exhibitions the films were initially presented as frozen unmoving images, projections of still photographs. Then, flaunting a mastery of visual showmanship, the projector began cranking and the images were made to move.”⁴⁵⁹ With the advent of mass digitization, the (re)found closeness between the still and the moving in cinema gained attention in the academic circles⁴⁶⁰ as well as the avant-garde (Matthias Müller, Christoph Girardet, Douglas Gordon, Karl Lemieux, and others), where this impulse already sprang to life in the 1960s and 1970s analog works by Peter Kubelka, Ernie Gehr, or Hollis Frampton.⁴⁶¹ Thomas Elsaesser considers the still image as cinema’s “memento mori: reminding us that at the heart of the cinema are acts of intervention in the living tissue of time, that the cinema is ‘death at work’.”⁴⁶² Therefore, showing the actual first frames of the first Czech films could be a way to show this repressed will to death at the very moment when the inert filmic matter starts to gain figurative contours. This revelatory yet obscuring dimension of the opening frames was already addressed in the first chapter, but the dilapidated images of *Grand Consecration* tell only a part of the story. Our videographic experiment abstracts from the proportion between figuration and materiality in the specific still images to examine the

⁴⁵⁷ Johannes Binotto, “Minor Instances, Major Consequences: Video Essay Workshop,” *Schnittstellen*, 2020, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://schnittstellen.me/lehre/video-essay-workshop/>.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ Gunning, *An Aesthetic of Astonishment*, 118.

⁴⁶⁰ See, for example: Eivind Rossaak, ed. *Between Stillness and Motion: Film, Photography, Algorithms* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).

⁴⁶¹ The mutual inspiration between experimental filmmakers and new film historians is well-known. For an overview, see André Habib, “Finding Early Cinema in the Avant-garde: Research and Investigation,” in *Provenance and Early Cinema*, eds. Joanne Bernardi, Paolo Cherchi Usai, Tami Williams and Joshua Yumibe (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 261–274.

⁴⁶² Thomas Elsaesser, “Stop/Motion,” in *Between Stillness and Motion: Film, Photography, Algorithms*, ed. Eivind Rossaak (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 118.

frame as a rupture in the cinematic movement, yet one that also initiates it and stirs it to life. In this way, the essay stages a complex dialectic between then and now. On the one hand, it exploits the possibilities of digital technology to shift perspective and bring hidden details to the fore; on the other, it is also a reflection of the earliest screening practice.

To put these ideas into practice, me and Adéla Kudlová from the National Film Archive compiled every single first frame of the 28 digitized original film materials (15 nitrate prints, 13 original negatives). The organization of the preserved films was based primarily on two criteria – the year of their production and thematic affinity. Frames 1–18 come from films presented at the Exhibition of Architecture and Engineering 1898: numbers 1–9 are from actualities that portrayed everyday life in Prague, 10–15 are from comedy scenes staged by Josef Šváb-Malostranský, 16–18 stem from Kříženecký’s obsession with Sokol athletic exercises.⁴⁶³ Frames 19–26 were extracted from other actualities from Prague life shot between 1901 and 1910, while the remaining two frames (27–28) present the monument of a famous Czech historian and politician František Palacký – first as a foundation stone (1898), then as an almost complete sculpture (1911)⁴⁶⁴ – and together represent a sort of longitudinal documentary that circumscribes both the creation of the monument and Kříženecký’s creative career.

The key question was how to present this assemblage of frames in a simple, not-too-intrusive form and simultaneously turn it into something more than an ordinary “supercut”⁴⁶⁵ that would simply replace one form of determinism (frames as units lost in a continuous movement) with another (frames blindly following each other in an algorithmically assembled whole). This is why we decided to show the frames in two forms at the same time – individually in detail and as part of a larger mosaic. Each frame is first seen as an isolated image and “deformed” in various ways (flickering, rotating, zooming in and out, stretching and narrowing). Then it is inserted into the background, where a mosaic of all the frames is

⁴⁶³ This obsession is perhaps most visible in his longer actualities from Sokol rallies which have been presented in the compilations.

⁴⁶⁴ The camera was also present when the monument was formally unveiled on July 1, 1912, resulting in the film *Unveiling Ceremony of the Monument – July 1, 1912* (Slavnost odhalení pomníku 1. července 1912; 1912). The film includes material from the earlier fragment *František Palacký Monument Prior to Its Completion* (Pomník Františka Palackého před dokončením; 1911) that served as a source for frame 28.

⁴⁶⁵ Andy Baio, “Fanboy Supercuts, Obsessive Video Montages,” *Waxy*, April 11, 2008, accessed July 31, 2021, https://waxy.org/2008/04/fanboy_supercuts_obsessive_video_montages/.

being built. By combining “the sequential and the simultaneous modes of viewing,”⁴⁶⁶ we present the 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. Paraphrasing Ian Bogost, the first frames “remind us that no matter how fluidly a system may operate, its members nevertheless remain utterly isolated, mutual aliens.”⁴⁶⁷ The intentionally disorganized and fluid mosaic of frames in the background guarantees that their differences can be perceived in proper context and compared by the spectator.



Figures 6.2–6.5: *The First Frames of Czech Cinema* (Jiří Anger and Adéla Kudlová, 2021), © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

The videographic essay also includes a written quote by Hannah Frank as another layer that thickens the interplay between various modes of seeing. In the vein of many videographic works,⁴⁶⁸ the text does not explain or mimic what is perceivable in the images but functions performatively as a distinctive meaning-making element. Frank’s quote, more a manifesto for taking individual frames seriously than an analysis or interpretation of what is going on, is

⁴⁶⁶ Tiago Baptista, “Lessons in Looking: The Digital Audiovisual Essay” (PhD diss., Birkbeck, University of London, 2016), 160.

⁴⁶⁷ Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 40.

⁴⁶⁸ There is even a “sub-genre” of videographic film studies called the “videographic epigraph.” “Videographic Epigraph,” in *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy*, eds. Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell and Catherine Grant (Scalar, 2019), accessed July 31, 2021, <http://videographicessay.org/works/videographic-essay/videographic-epigraph>.

phased out into fragments and distributed in space, gradually revealing itself during the essay according to the rhythm of the images and turning the individual phrases into building blocks of their own kind. Finally, an experimental soundtrack by Jan Burian, which accompanies the digitized films of Jan Kříženecký on the DVD / Blu-ray collection, was added and slightly modified to amplify the humming noise of the nitrate materials.

What do we learn about the individual frames specifically? I would like to leave this question open as the essay should be able to speak by itself; nevertheless, initial observation could focus on an issue that has been indicated in this dissertation yet never fully explored – the perforations. At the outset of cinema, perforations were often perceived as a “weakening” of film, something that makes films more vulnerable. The single pair of perforations Lumière brothers used was a compromise,⁴⁶⁹ ensuring that the perforated film strip “would be less susceptible to tear or break from the impact, however minimal, of the claws” while still being able to advance steadily through the film gate.⁴⁷⁰ The films of Jan Kříženecký have a single round hole on each side of the frame,⁴⁷¹ instead of the standard four angular ones, making them significantly harder to project, restore, or even scan.⁴⁷² Thanks to the videographic essay, we can see that the vintage Lumière perforations are not always present in their former state. Although the not yet standardized aspect ratio of the films was “adjusted in order to make the entire frame visible (even during moments of vertical instability) and also the perforation whenever it was possible,”⁴⁷³ due to the limitations and divergences from current standard ratios it was not always entirely viable. This is the reason why we usually see the perforation only at one edge of the frame in a semicircular form.

Furthermore, many of the digitized first frames (particularly those from the prints) are torn to such an extent that the circular holes are nowhere to be seen – some of them – 13, 14, 18 – now have no perforation, others – 1, 2, 4, 10, 15 – had their parts replaced with later generation film stock with four perforations. The latter group may be understood as a sign of restoration not done right but also as a document of how accidental or pragmatic physical

⁴⁶⁹ For example, Étienne-Jules Marey used no perforations, while Thomas Alva Edison used four. Benoît Turquety, *Inventing Cinema: Machines, Gestures and Media History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 173.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁴⁷¹ The only exception is *František Palacký Monument Prior to Its Completion* (Frame no. 28), which was shot on a standard material with four rectangular perforations.

⁴⁷² Jeanne Pommeau and Jiří Anger, “The Digitization of Jan Kříženecký’s Films.” *Illuminace* 31, no. 1 (2019), 104–107.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

interventions alter the archival artifact throughout the years. The single most interesting case might be Frame no. 5 – taken from *Cyclists* (*Cyklisté*, 1898) – which preserves the Lumière half-circle yet also includes three other holes carved into the image as if the film was meant for standard projections. It is not clear whether they testify to mishandling by archivists or to damage undertaken in a machine designed for film stock with four perforations, but as an impossible archival artifact, it belongs firmly to Groo’s bad film histories.



Figure 6.6: *Cyclists* (*Cyklisté*; Jan Kříženecký, 1898, source: nitrate print), © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

Altogether, the videographic essay *The First Frames of Czech Cinema* presents the opening images as things with complex material histories that problematize even the few general notions we can state about the digitized films of Jan Kříženecký. The deformative approach, albeit not followed dogmatically, allowed us to transform the corpus in a way that highlights its always incomplete, never fully self-coincident character. The crack-up that emerges 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.

Conclusion: Digital Kříženecký Off the Scale?

After six chapters full of ruptures, fissures, voids, and intervals that produce forms of the crack-up of various origins, functions, and aesthetic effects, the lingering question is whether the emphasis on the generative character of Fitzgerald's (and Deleuze's) concept has paid off. In her article on the crack-up and the "event" as a signal of change and becoming that can be simultaneously creative and destructive, Fredrika Spindler asks directly: "How, then, are we to think the crack[-up] in order for it to become something else than destruction; how are we to think the event in order for it to not be necessarily fatal, and to transform instead into life?"⁴⁷⁴ She mentions Deleuze's term "counter-actualization,"⁴⁷⁵ which "allows the event to break loose from itself as it is incarnated."⁴⁷⁶ In the closing paragraph of "Porcelain and Volcano," Deleuze argues that even though the transformative event must involve suffering, must endure the crack-up being "inscribed in the flesh," this painful actualization must be doubled by a counter-actualization which "limits, moves, and transfigures it."⁴⁷⁷ To be the "mime of what effectively occurs, to double the actualization with a counter-actualization, the identification with a distance, like the true actor and dancer, is to give to the truth of the event the only chance of not being confused with its inevitable actualization. It is to give the crack the chance of flying over its own incorporeal surface area, without stopping at the bursting within each body; it is, finally, to give us the chance to go farther than we would have believed possible."⁴⁷⁸ In the language of Digital Kříženecký, the figures 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.

Thus, each chapter of the dissertation should be evaluated in terms of how the specific form of the crack-up in a single Kříženecký film reshaped the respective grand concept or theory and

⁴⁷⁴ Fredrika Spindler, "Event, Crack-up and Line of Flight – Deleuze Reading Fitzgerald," in *Rethinking Time: Essays on History, Memory, and Representation*, eds. Hans Ruin and Andrus Ers (Flemingberg: Södertörn University, 2011), 261.

⁴⁷⁵ For an unknown reason, Spindler refers to the term as "counter-effectuation." Ibid.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁷ Gilles Deleuze, "Porcelain and Volcano," 161.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

in what ways the found footage and videographic operations designed to make the crack-up persistent helped move it closer to potential counter-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 distort 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 Assniation 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 reprogramed 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 on 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 (flickering, rotating, zooming in and out, stretching and narrowing), 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.

At present, my main preoccupation is how all these forms of the crack-up in relatively marginal aesthetic objects such as the digitized films of Jan Kříženecký can fare within the ceaseless flux of digital images. Is my focus on figurative and material details in early Czech films of any relevance in times when, to borrow words from the recent edited volume *Photography Off the Scale* (2021), “to see an image is by necessity to consider it as part of an extensive dataset or a database?”⁴⁷⁹ Is the effort to play with electric horses and trembling bridges not a futile diversion when we need to come to terms with billions of audiovisual data that are often not created by humans nor even meant to be seen by them? Are these individual material traces and gestures worthy of special attention when every single image can be “described according to thousands of separate dimensions?”⁴⁸⁰ As resistant as they are to easy nostalgification, what can save the cracked-up figures in Digital Kříženecký from being disconnected from their context and assembled into algorithmically pre-designed compilations and playlists of imperfect analog images and disturbing archival fragments?

The increasing datafication of the online space inevitably affects how we understand the theory and practice of found footage and archival film in general. Found footage as a mode of accumulating pre-existing images into new arrangements dissolves into a highly automatized practice in which the human appropriator seems more and more replaceable by software. Fascinating and thought-provoking found footage films are still being made, but now when confronted with image overload and digital monoculture, the once subversive cultural role of the genre is being severely questioned by many,⁴⁸¹ and the very principle of excavating previously unknown images or defamiliarizing images that are known too well has become both an impossibility and a cliché. Similarly, the amount of previously inaccessible archival footage in the digital sphere continues to grow, but the archives’ loss of control over their presentation makes it harder and harder to discern what is “authentic” and what is not. All the upscaled, colorized, 4K, 60 fps early films emerging on YouTube within the last few years may seem scandalous to archivists and film historians, yet it appears highly probable that these enhanced archival films will be an entry point to early cinema for an overwhelming number of people. Despite the effort of the National Film Archive (Národní filmový archiv) in

⁴⁷⁹ Jussi Parikka and Tomáš Dvořák, “Introduction: On the Scale, Quantity and Measure of Images,” in *Photography Off the Scale: Technologies and Theories of the Mass Image*, eds. Tomáš Dvořák and Jussi Parikka (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 4.

⁴⁸⁰ Lev Manovich, “The Science of Culture? Social Computing, Digital Humanities and Cultural Analytics,” *Journal of Cultural Analytics*, May 23, 2016, accessed September 20, 2021. <https://culturalanalytics.org/article/11060>.

⁴⁸¹ See, for example: Lars Henrik Gass, *Film and Art After Cinema* (Zagreb: Multimedijalni institut, 2019), 143–172.

Prague, Digital Kříženecký will not be immune to these processes and shifts. Still, it is worth curating the films' cracked-up figures as features that are always already new, and therefore at least provisionally resisting the temptation to make the films more "contemporary."

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,⁴⁸² computer-driven archival research has been predominantly associated with the more quantitative strands of digital humanities.⁴⁸³ 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 transformation of video-editing programs into machines that dissect film objects into a multitude of cracked-up forms 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

⁴⁸² See, for example: "Video essays," *Eyefilm.nl*, accessed September 20, 2021, <https://www.eyefilm.nl/en/watch-and-listen/video-essays>; "Video Essays," *filmmuseum.at*, accessed September 20, 2021, https://www.filmmuseum.at/en/research_education/education/video_essays.

⁴⁸³ 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.

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 as 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.”⁴⁸⁴ 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,”⁴⁸⁵ 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.

⁴⁸⁴ Hoi Lun Law, *Ambiguity and Film Criticism: Reasonable Doubt* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 57.

⁴⁸⁵ 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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Filmography

50 Years of Cinema (50 let kinematografie; František Sádek, 1946)

An Assignment in the Mill (Dostaveničko ve mlýnici; Jan Kříženecký, 1898)

Automobile Accident (Accident d’automobile; Auguste Lumière and Louis Lumière, operator unknown, 1903–1905)

Between the Nile and the Congo (Tusschen Nijl en Congo; Paul Julien, ca 1930)

Boat Leaving the Port (Barque sortant du port; Auguste Lumière and Louis Lumière, operator Louis Lumière, 1895)

Chemical Intervention in (Film) History (Jürgen Reble, 2019)

Coach Transport (Kočárová doprava; Jan Kříženecký, 1898)

Concorde Square (obelisks and fountains) (Place de la Concorde (obélisque et fontaines); Auguste Lumière and Louis Lumière, operator unknown, 1897)

Cowboy and “Indian” Film (Raphael Montañez Ortiz, 1958)

Crack, Brutal, Grief (R. Bruce Elder, 2000)

Cyclists (Cyklisté; Jan Kříženecký, 1898)

Decasia: The State of Decay (Bill Morrison, 2002)

Eadweard Muybridge, Zoopraxographer (Thom Andersen, 1975)

Escorting the Cradle of František Palacký from Hodslavice to the Prague Exhibition Grounds (Přenesení kolébky Františka Palackého z Hodslavic na Výstaviště; Jan Kříženecký, 1898)

Exercises with Indian Clubs by the Sokol of Malá Strana (Cvičení s kužely Sokolů malostranských; Jan Kříženecký, 1898)

Exhibition Sausage Seller and Bill-Poster (Výstavní párkař a lepič plakátů; Jan Kříženecký, 1898)

Fallen Asleep When Young (Silja; Teuvo Tulio, 1937)

Flame (Polte; Sami van Ingen, 2018)

Forgotten Silver (Peter Jackson and Costa Botes, 1995)

Frankenstein (James Whale, 1931)

František Palacký Monument Prior to Its Completion (Pomník Františka Palackého před dokončením; Jan Kříženecký, 1911)

Fred Ott's Sneeze (William K. L. Dickson, 1894)

From Seriousness to Laughter (Vom Ernst zur Lachen; produced by Oskar Messter, 1897)

Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge (Slavnostní vysvěcení mostu císaře Františka I.; Jan Kříženecký, 1901)

History of Czechoslovak Cinema, Part I (Dějiny československé kinematografie I; Vojtěch Količ, 1967)

How It Started (Jak to začalo; Květa Lehovcová, 1968)

In Search of Lost Time (Hledání ztraceného času; Pavel Vantuch, 1991–2012)

Indochina: Children Gathering Rice Scattered by Western Women (Enfants annamites ramassant des sapèques devant la Pagode des Dames; Auguste Lumière and Louis Lumière, operator Gabriel Veyre, 1900)

It Wasn't Love (Sadie Benning, 1992)

Jan Kříženecký (Bohumil Veselý, 1968)

Jan Kříženecký (Vojtěch Trapl, 1983)

keep that dream burning (Rainer Kohlberger, 2017)

Kon-Tiki (Thor Heyerdahl, 1950)

La sortie (Siegfried A. Fruhauf, 1999)

Laughter and Tears (Smích a pláč; Jan Kříženecký, 1898)

Lumière! (Lumière! L'aventure commence; Thierry Frémaux, 2016)

Lumière's Train, Arriving at the Station (Al Razutis, 1979)

Lyrical Nitrate (Lyrisch Nitraat; Peter Delpout, 1991)

Midsummer Pilgrimage in a Czechoslovak Village (Svatojanská pouť v československé vesnici; Jan Kříženecký, 1898)

Never Never Land (Michael Fleming, 2018)

Night and Fog (Nuit et brouillard; Alain Resnais, 1955)

nostalgia (Hollis Frampton, 1971)

Old Town Firemen (Staroměstští hasiči; Jan Kříženecký, 1898)

Opening Ceremony of the Čech Bridge (Slavnost otevření nového Čechova mostu; Jan Kříženecký, 1908)

Passio (Paolo Cherchi Usai, 2006)

Persona (Ingmar Bergman, 1966)

Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)

Queen Victoria's Last Visit to Ireland (1900)

Rubber (Quentin Dupieux, 2010)

Singin' in the Rain (Stanley Donen, 1954)

Square of Purkyně in Královské Vinohrady (Purkyňovo náměstí na Královských Vinohradech; Jan Kříženecký, 1898, lost)

Thank You, Mr. Kříženecký (Díky, pane Kříženecký; Oleg Reif, 1978)

The Algorithmic Nickelodeon (Shane Denson, 2019)

The Bey of Tunis and His Entourage Descend the Steps of the Bardo (Le bey de Tunis et les personnages de sa suite descendant l'escalier du Bardo, Auguste Lumière and Louis Lumière, operator Alexandre Promio, 1903)

The Big Swallow (James Williamson, 1901)

The Empire Strikes Back (Irvin Kershner, 1980)

The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague (První den jarních dostihů pražských; Jan Kříženecký, 1908)

The First Frames of Czech Cinema (Jiří Anger and Adéla Kudlová, 2021)

The First Hundred Years: A Celebration of American Movies (Chuck Workman, 1995)

The Great Train Robbery (Edwin S. Porter, 1903)

The Kiss (Eadweard Muybridge, 1872)

The May Irwin Kiss (William Heise, 1896)

The Musketeers of Pig Alley (D. W. Griffith, 1912)

The Philosophy of Horror: A Symphony of Film Theory (Péter Lichter and Bori Máté, 2020)

The Stolen Jewels (D. W. Griffith, 1908)

The VERTIGO of Anagnorisis (Catherine Grant, 2012)

Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son (Ken Jacobs, 1969)

Touching Sound (Johannes Binotto, 2018)

Touching the Film Object? (Catherine Grant, 2011)

Trace (Johannes Binotto, 2020)

Transparences (Trasparenze; Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, 1998)

Unveiling Ceremony of the Monument – July 1, 1912 (Slavnost odhalení pomníku 1. července 1912; Unknown, 1912)

Vertigo (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)

Westminster Bridge (Pont de Westminster; Auguste Lumière and Louis Lumière, operator unknown, 1896)

When Photographs Came to Life (Když oživily fotografie; Ivo Novák, 1958)

Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon (La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon; Auguste Lumière and Louis Lumière, operator Louis Lumière, 1895)

Figures

Figures 0.1–0.5: 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); *An Assniation in the Mill* (Dostaveníčko ve mlýnici; 1898, source: nitrate print); *Laughter and Tears* (Smích a pláč; 1898, source: nitrate print) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

Figures 1.1–1.11: *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge* (Slavnostní vysvěcení mostu císaře Františka I.; Jan Kříženecký, 1901, source: nitrate print) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

Figures 2.1–2.12: *The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague* (První den jarních dostihů pražských; Jan Kříženecký, 1908, source: original negative) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

Figures 3.1–3.8: *Opening Ceremony of the Čech Bridge* (Slavnost otevření nového Čechova mostu; Jan Kříženecký, 1908, source: original negative) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

Figures 4.1–4.8: *An Assniation in the Mill* (Dostaveníčko ve mlýnici; Jan Kříženecký, 1898, source: nitrate print) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

Figures 5.1–5.13: *Laughter and Tears* (Smích a pláč; Jan Kříženecký, 1898, source: nitrate print) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

Figure 6.1: The first frames of all Kříženecký's films that were digitized from the original nitrate carriers (1898–1911, source: vintage prints and original negatives), © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

Figures 6.2–6.5: *The First Frames of Czech Cinema* (Jiří Anger and Adéla Kudlová, 2021), © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

Figure 6.6: *Cyclists* (Cyklisté; Jan Kříženecký, 1898, source: nitrate print) © Národní filmový archiv, Prague

Supplements

The First Frames of Czech Cinema

Videographic essay

Created by: Jiří Anger and Adéla Kudlová

Music: Jan Burian

Length: 04:19

Date of production: 2021

Production: National Film Archive (Národní filmový archiv), Prague

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