

External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Jiří Anger

"Aesthetics of the Crack-Up: Digital Kříženecký and the Autonomous Creativity of Archival Footage"

Submitted in 2022 at the Department of Film Studies

I. Brief summary of the dissertation

In his dissertation "Aesthetics of the Crack-Up: Digital Kříženecký and the Autonomous Creativity of Archival Footage," Jiří Anger raises the intriguing question of what it would mean (and whether it would be possible) to "do film theory 'from below,' from the perspective of a film object"—which means, among other things, taking filmic objects out of the various overdetermining contexts of institutional treatment and authorial intentions and taking seriously their material specificity, including the defects and glitches that inform them as historically and existentially singular entities. For this purpose, Anger conducts a close examination—both textual and videographic—of Jan Kříženecký's early Czech films, made between 1898 and 1911, which have recently been scanned in 4K quality. Here, digitization is not incidental but rather central to the argument about the objects' existential specificity, as it informs the ongoing transformation of unintentional aesthetic qualities that Anger seeks to foreground. Centrally, these include accidental mediations between figural form and materiality—mediations that are traced to their specific historical origins and theorized in light of Gilles Deleuze's elaboration of the term "crack-up" (which the latter borrows from F. Scott Fitzgerald).

II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

Anger's dissertation is at once highly original, compellingly argued, and executed according to the highest standards of scholarly research and expression. The question that Anger raises about what it would mean to do film theory "from below" resonates with recent interventions from "new materialism" and related strands of theory, but it does so with a specificity that is sometimes lacking in those fields and with a clearer relevance to questions of the relation (rather than lack of relation) between human sensation, agency, etc. and the technologically modulated material environments in which we live. In short, this question—and Anger's detailed answer to it, which constitutes the bulk of his dissertation—has far-reaching philosophical significance that goes beyond traditional issues in film studies to implicate the very role of the human in a rapidly changing ecological and ultimately cosmological context. What is particularly praiseworthy, however, is the way that these issues are approached: not by way of philosophical abstraction, but by way of concrete and detailed analysis of specific objects in their historical and material contexts. In short, this is one of the most exciting and accomplished dissertations that I have had the pleasure of reading in recent years.

III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

As stated above, it is my opinion that Jiří Anger's dissertation "Aesthetics of the Crack-Up: Digital Kříženecký and the Autonomous Creativity of Archival Footage" is an extraordinarily accomplished and original piece of scholarship, deserving of the highest distinction. In the following, I will provide more detailed analysis of the dissertation's structure, form, and execution.

1. Structure of the argument

The dissertation is exemplary in its structuration and argumentation. In large part, its success in this regard is due to the way the introduction starts by posing a clear but complex question (about what it would mean to do film theory “from below”), explaining lucidly what the stakes of that question are, and then, in the subsequent chapters, providing a cogent and multilayered answer to that question, articulated in terms of both historical and theoretical concerns that stem directly from the elaboration of the question and its implications. More concretely, the question is approached by way of the “accidental aesthetics” (15) that emerge when we take seriously the encounters between “figurative and material dimensions” (15) in filmic objects. Anger elaborates this aesthetic/material dimension in terms of a subtle rethinking of debates over found footage film and archival film studies (16-20), which allows him to open up a broader philosophical space in which materiality and figuration can be reappraised (20-23). The reasoning here is clear and convincing, and the overall trajectory is compelling. Finally, the conclusion refocuses the new (and highly original) framework which Anger is developing in terms of Deleuze’s appropriation of Fitzgerald’s notion of the “crack-up” (23-28), thus solidifying the theoretical foundation for the dissertation.

The following five chapters then carefully unfold the implications of this theoretical reframing by focusing on five individual films, each of which features a single “ontological crack-up between the figurative and material elements” (28)—a mysterious discoloration of the film strip (chapter 1), traces of static electricity on the film base that seem to portray lightning striking the depicted horses (chapter 2), a trembling of the camera that suggests a trembling of its objects (chapter 3), scratches that infect both substrate and image (chapter 4), and a misplaced splice that suggests a Frankensteinian cutting and stitching of a human head (chapter 5). Each of these analyses, conducted in impressive material and historical detail, is connected to a particular concept that further fleshes out the theoretical significance of the dissertation: the notion of the “death of cinema,” which is paradoxically recast as an aesthetic affordance of filmic objects (chapter 1); the indexicality of the filmic image, which is impressively complicated beyond its standard treatment in recent film theory (chapter 2); the philosophical concept of transduction, as it appears in Gilbert Simondon’s philosophy, which places the dissertation’s aesthetic concerns in a decidedly non-anthropocentric frame (chapter 3); the historicity of film and filmic objects, which upsets notions of stable origins and meanings (chapter 4); and “haptic visibility,” which again reframes the figural in relation to the material while foregrounding the autonomy of processual mediations and their meanings (chapter 5). The final chapter consolidates various elements from these chapters while taking the argument back from the text to the films themselves (in digital form).

The clear structure of the dissertation, and the careful choice of objects and concepts treated in each of its chapters, provides for a lucid and compelling argument, whereby the initial question at its core progressively gains further depth and significance.

2. Formal aspects of the dissertation

All of the standard formal aspects of the dissertation are correctly executed. There are no inconsistencies in terms of abbreviations, syntax of bibliographical references, transcriptions of foreign terms, etc. Footnotes are formatted correctly and, more importantly, are genuinely useful in terms not only of documenting references but also providing essential discursive contexts for the debates into which the dissertation intervenes, elaborating important historical contexts, and pointing to both material specificities and theoretical implications of the argument and analysis unfolding in the main

body text. The language of the dissertation is grammatically correct and free of linguistic infelicities. And the dissertation is visually well-presented and graphically well-formatted.

In short, all of the formalities attached to a scholarly work at the doctoral level are perfectly in order, as it should be. Beyond these formalities, however, I would like to commend the author in regard to a somewhat different matter of *form*—namely, the successful integration and critical interrogation of videographic methods in the context of historical and theoretical argumentation. The dissertation has materially benefited from the author's work at the National Film Archive as the curator of the DVD/Blu-ray edition of Kříženecký's films and from his first-hand experience, in this context, working with the digitization/restoration team. This experience is evident in both the comprehensive knowledge and detailed attention that Anger brings to his objects, as well as informing his broader theoretical conclusions. To this extent it has clearly left an indelible mark on the formal organization of the dissertation. But Anger goes further in giving his argument another form, embodying it materially in a number of videographic operations—some of which appear within the dissertation in the form of images reprinted on the page, while others appear as a deformative video essay that accompanies the final chapter and raises important formal-theoretical questions about videographic criticism and theory and its relation to more traditional text-based scholarship. This is an innovative mode of engaging with the dissertation's topic, and both the boldness of its inclusion and the quality of its execution is to be applauded.

3. Use of sources and/or material

The author's use of primary and secondary sources is commendable in both its scope and its attention to detail. As mentioned above, the dissertation benefits greatly from the author's direct experience and observation of the digitization process by which Kříženecký's films have been made available today. Additionally, the transformative interventions into this material, by way of digital editing and analysis, is very illuminating. The care with which the author treats these materials, even when subjecting them to transformation, is evident throughout.

Secondary sources are also used appropriately. Anger's knowledge of the field(s) of his study is impressive, and there are no deficits to be noted here. The scope and relevance of citations is more than appropriate.

In all, the sources and materials treated in the dissertation are relevant and illuminating, and the interpretive work done on their basis is first class. Due to the material intervention that both underlies and is incorporated into the dissertation (especially its graphic and videographic elements), the primary sources really stand out in a way that is all too rare in film and media studies.

4. Personal contribution to the subject

As the foregoing comments have sought to demonstrate, the dissertation is a highly original contribution to the fields of film and media studies and, by extension, to the philosophy of media and technology, as well as the emerging field of videographic criticism and theory. It significantly furthers each of these fields by virtue, first, of interfacing them in an innovative way and, second, by confronting them with challenging questions regarding the relations between representational form and materiality as well as between historicity, technicity, interpretation, and (human and technical) agency.

IV. Questions for the author

Though I will unfortunately not be able to attend the doctoral defense, I would be very curious to hear how the author would respond to the argument that, by embracing the accidental and the unintended into the realm of the aesthetic while also decentering human agency and sensation more generally, that the aesthetic qualities of an object are rendered fundamentally arbitrary. To be clear, I do not want to suggest that this is problem for the author, or that he has entered into any kind of logical contradiction, but I would anticipate that some readers of the dissertation might feel this way. I would be genuinely interested to hear how he would respond and elaborate the philosophical implications of this rethinking of aesthetics.

V. Conclusion

I recommend the submitted dissertation, Jiří Anger's "Aesthetics of the Crack-Up: Digital Kříženecký and the Autonomous Creativity of Archival Footage," with the tentative grade of pass. In fact, it is in the strongest terms and without hesitation that I recommend the work for the highest distinction available to a dissertation at your institution.

May 22, 2022

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