

AUDIOVISUAL APPROACHES AND THE ARCHIVE

A Tale of Two Desktops: The First Czech Films in Parallel Worlds

What kind of object is a digitised analogue film? The so-called 'digital surrogates', or 'digital reproductions of pre-existing works' (Cameron 2021: 4), are infiltrating the online space in increasing numbers and higher and higher picture quality. Despite that, surprisingly little effort has been made to theorise these 'surrogates' as full-fledged material, historical, and aesthetic artefacts. Archivists and historians judge them according to their fidelity to the analogue originals (Fossati 2018), while digital media scholars see them as relatively homogenous and replaceable fragments surrendering to the logic of big data and algorithmic patterns (Parikka and Dvořák 2021). Can a practice-based audiovisual approach give these artefacts proper space – one that would account for their historically determined mixture of photochemical and digital elements while also emphasising their potential for change and variation?

Our audiovisual essay focuses on the earliest Czech films, shot between 1898 and 1911 by Jan Kříženecký and recently digitised by the National Film Archive in Prague. The NFA team led by Jeanne Pommeau aimed to use digital technology not to retouch or (over)stabilise the films but to approximate the current state of the preserved materials (Pommeau and Anger 2019). Thanks to this non-intrusive approach, we can



observe physical deformations that have appeared in the films due to ageing or technological dispositions of the equipment obtained from the Lumière brothers (nitrate prints and negatives and the Cinématographe apparatus). The digitised artefacts thus showcase both the original features of photochemical technology and the new potentialities of digital tools to make these features more visible – especially at the level of the individual frames – and distributable across a multitude of online platforms and software interfaces. But how can we take advantage of this disjointed existence to analyse the artefacts' aesthetic effects, or more precisely, the moments when material traces and gestures produce 'weird shapes' in the figurative image (Anger 2024)?

To examine the artefacts within the domains of their actual and potential circulation, we have employed a 'desktop documentary' format, which enables scholars to simulate the experience of browsing through the online landscape by

screen-capturing the computer or smartphone desktop (Kiss 2021; Anger and Lee 2023). Further, we 'doubled' this interface by orchestrating parallel operations with the film frames on a wooden desk (Binotto 2023). This doubling reflects the





fact that the seemingly immaterial digital ‘surrogates’ always have the capacity to re-enter the world outside the screen and again become physical and haptic in a traditional sense – in this case, via a printer. The two-desktop scheme then serves to investigate three of Kříženecký’s films – *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge* (Slavnostní vysvěcení mostu císaře Františka I., 1901), *The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague* (První den jarních dostihů pražských, 1908), and *Opening Ceremony of the Čech Bridge* (Slavnost otevření nového Čechova mostu, 1908). More specifically, the analysis focuses on the aesthetic functions of distinctive material dispositions of the Lumière film equipment within the moving image – yellowish-orange colouration, marks of static electricity, and camera instability, respectively. This approach highlights the weird shapes surfacing in the films’ figurative content – a colour veil, electric horses, and a trembling black wave – underscoring the meaning-making role of accidents across both virtual and physical worlds.

As a result, our audiovisual essay marries the affordances of videographic criticism and archival practice by showcasing that a digitised analogue film is, first and foremost, a malleable and configurative object. Its aesthetic effects are not determined solely by its fidelity to the source material, nor to any artistic intent or represented ‘content’ behind it, but by its hybrid materiality, circulation, and appropriation across various spaces and media. A self-reflexive approach that foregrounds the subject-object dynamics of analysing moving images and sounds in today’s (post)digital reality (Denson



2019), combined with an understanding of the physical properties of film, video, and digital materials and apparatuses, can help us better grasp the unfinished character of archival audiovisual artefacts. Instead of being mere ruins of the past, ephemeral fragments like Kříženecký’s films reveal themselves as always-already open to speculative, yet materially grounded, reimagination.

Watch the audiovisual essay here:
<https://youtu.be/uZ629gTCTDE>

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Anger is the author of two monographs, two edited volumes, and numerous articles and videos in journals such as *Screen NECSUS*, *Film-Philosophy*, *The Moving Image*, *[in]Transition*, or *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*. For the article ‘Trembling Meaning: Camera Instability and Gilbert Simondon’s Transduction in Czech Archival Film’, he won the *Film-Philosophy* Annual Article Award 2022. His most recent books are *Towards a Film Theory from Below: Archival Film and the Aesthetics of the Crack-Up* (Bloomsbury, Thinking Media series, 2024) and an edited volume on the digitization of the earliest Czech films at the National Film Archive in Prague (*Digitální Kříženecký: Nový život prvních českých filmů*; NFA, 2023).

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Veronika Hanáková focuses on the materiality, memory, and preservation of digital images and artefacts, particularly DVD features and interfaces. She is part of a grant project called Grassroots of Digital Europe: from Historic to Contemporary Cultures of Creative Computing. She has published articles and videos in journals such as *NECSUS*, *[in]Transition*, *Illuminace*, or *Tecmerin*. She is a guest editor of a special issue 'Configuring Computer Labor in Film and Audiovisual Media' for *Illuminace* (no. 2/2024). Together with Jiří Anger, she curates the Audiovisual Essay section at the Marienbad Film Festival.

JIŘÍ ŽÁK

Jiří Žák is an artist based in Prague. In his audiovisual works, he often combines documentary, staged, and performative strategies to explore topics related to contemporary visual culture, local history, and postcolonial world order. He addresses the identity of post-communist countries and its deconstruction through non-western perspectives. Žák has researched the issue of Czech and Czechoslovak arms export to the Arabic-speaking countries on a long-term basis. Together with artist Matěj Pavlík, Žák prepared a chapter 'The Practice of Decolonization' within the two-year project Regeneration of Artyčok TV. Žák has presented his work at a number of independent galleries and institutions in the Czech Republic, and also internationally, e.g. at the Kiev Biennale 2021, the Warsaw Biennial 2018, Budapest Gallery or Biennale Matter of Art Prague 2020. He was part of Berlinale Talents 2024. He is a co-laureate of Jindřich Chalupecký Award 2020. In 2015, he became a holder of the EXIT Award. Besides his work for Artyčok TV, he teaches at Prague City University and The Academy of Fine Arts in Prague. Currently, he is a PhD student at the Faculty of Fine Arts of Brno University of Technology.

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