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Towards a Film Theory From Below: Archival Film and the Aesthetics of the Crack-up, by Jiří Anger. Bloomsbury 2024, pp. 232.

Chiara Grizzaffi

Towards a Film Theory From Below by Jiří Anger is an illuminating study. With rigour and originality, it mobilises a wide range of perspectives to allow us to see what has always been before our eyes, but from an unexpected angle. Certainly, the author's broad and eclectic background contributes to the many successful insights offered throughout the volume: Anger is a film historian, curator, and archivist with a strong inclination towards theoretical reflection and philosophical speculation, while also working as a practitioner capable of employing practice-based methodologies such as videographic criticism. The author, therefore, seamlessly combines different tools and perspectives to trace a path that moves—as the title suggests—from the micro-dimension of the works of Czech cinema pioneer Jan Kříženecký to the macro-dimension of theoretical reflections on cinema and moving images. Such reflections enter into a productive dialectical relationship with the deeply concrete nature and materiality of the cinematic objects handled—one might say quite literally—by the scholar.

From this perspective, Anger's study is situated within the "material turn" (Fossati) that has impacted both film theory and the interests of certain filmmakers, such as Bill Morrison—a name that, not coincidentally, recurs throughout the book. Yet, just as micro- and macro-history are deeply interrelated, the attention paid to the materiality of film and to its technological devices is woven into the analysis of the formal and aesthetic aspects of representation.

Two key concepts bind all these dimensions together without losing the productive tension between concreteness and abstraction. The first one, explicitly declared in the volume's subtitle, is, quite oxymoronically, the "crack-up". An expression borrowed from literature—specifically from a short series of stories by F. Scott Fitzgerald for *Esquire* in 1936—the concept of the crack-up serves as a metaphor for decay and irreversible transformation. It is a rupture produced by the tension between the potential and the actual, between what could be and what actually occurs. Also taken up by Gilles Deleuze (1990), the crack-up is not a sudden rupture but a process that simmers beneath the surface. For Anger, it names an unstable, contentious relationship between the figurative and material dimensions, between the fixity toward which the act of representation strives and the accidents and progressive decay to which matter is subjected.

In this respect, the concept of the crack-up proves extraordinarily productive for reflecting on works like those of Kříženecký and early cinema in general. These works are marked by a constitutive instability: they were created during a phase when technology was still in development, they respond to the tentative aesthetics of the "cinema of attractions" (Gaudreault and Gunning), and they are characterised by fragility and the threat of time's passing. The

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figurative dimension is constantly affected by material contingencies; indeed, the book repeatedly recalls Paolo Cherchi Usai's definition of cinema as "the art of moving image destruction" (6). When the crack-up manifests itself, something is irrevocably lost; yet this loss coincides with the emergence of a new point of origin—a generative reconfiguration of the image.

The second concept that clarifies how the seemingly opposing forces in Anger's research are intertwined is that of "theory as *theoria*", "an actual creative and active doing", one that allows us "to invent novel ways of seeing (and also hearing, touching, and so on)" (8). Here, theory is not merely reflective but operative, lying at the core of Anger's practice-based methodology.

These premises (and promises) are rigorously maintained in the individual chapters, which always open "from below": each is introduced by the description of a Křížanecký film, whose material characteristics and accidental details—whether introduced in production or accruing over time—trigger reflections on how a different intertwining of materiality and figuration emerges around each crack.

The first chapter returns to the origins of Czech cinema—opening with *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge* (Slavnostní vysvecení mostu císare Frantiska J. I., Jan Křížanecký, 1901)—and to the question of the ontology of the image. The orange colour veil and the patina covering the film's images, whose legibility is further threatened by spots and bubbles, speak to the inevitable failure of any attempt to preserve the traces of what once was—here recalling Bazin's "mummy complex" (3). However, through close, frame-by-frame scrutiny of the collapse of the figurative into the material, Anger reveals the illusory nature of every effort to recover the original of an object—the film—whose existence is instead defined by infinite variables and mutations. Likewise, any attempt to assign a definitive endpoint proves untenable: the practices of reuse and manipulation, enacted by the author, but also by many experimental filmmakers, allow for the reframing of decay, of the film's being devoured by "impossible life forms" not as a fatalistic end, but as a generative "alternative figuration of a life force to come" (58).

The emphasis on the non-human elements of the image is firmly grounded in the new-materialism framework that shapes the book, and thus cuts across the subsequent chapters. The second chapter revolves around the encounter between animality—the horse races in *The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague* (*První den jarních dostihů pražských*, 1908)—and the mechanical "static marks" impressed on the images by static electricity. These marks, while threatening figurative clarity, reveal what Anger calls the "quadruple logic of indexicality" (59), represented by the "interrelated doubles of figuration and materiality, trace and deixis" (80). In the third chapter, Gilbert Simondon's concept of transduction becomes fundamental to understanding the "accidental aesthetics" of *Opening Ceremony of the Čech Bridge* (*Slavnost otevření nového Čechova mostu*, 1908) (85), where the movement of subjects combines with the camera's shaking to generate a "black wave" (86)—a manifestation of "metastability", an emergent condition within the entangled relationship between technology, environment, and the human user (87).

Anger's methodological invitation at the end of this chapter is especially inspiring: he suggests experimenting with videographic manipulation—such as slowing down or GIF transformation—not only to grasp the entanglements produced by this distributed agency or "embodiment" (Denson 328), but also to generate other transductive (dis)equilibria.

The presence of accidental elements also concerns the fourth chapter, which is slightly more eccentric because it shifts more toward the "epistemological aspects of film experience" (26). Resulting from manipulations during editing and projection of two separate rolls, the vertical scratches of *An Assignation in the Mill* (*Dostaveníčko ve mlýnici*, 1898) hide another primal scene, that of a kiss, bringing to the fore instead the effects of those handling and projection practices that make the film object actually visible. This problematises the truth of the archival image and the very possibility of a 'pristine original' toward which one might feel the "temporal disparity" at the core of what Jaimie Baron calls the "archive effect" (2014). Yet, the frame-by-frame repetition undertaken by Anger manifests the heuristic potential of return, a deconstructive and at the same time reconstructive gesture "to multiply the number of ways in which the archival document can differ from itself and yet still be understood and felt as archival" (130).

Finally, the fifth chapter returns to the "more-than-human" with the analysis of some frames from *Laughter and Tears* (*Smích a pláč*, 1898), to focus on haptic visuality. Once again, thanks to the peculiar nature of the filmic material—a close-up marked by alterations and interrupted by splices that recall the sutured head of Frankenstein's monster—the theoretical perspective gains additional complexity. While threatening the affective fascination that elicits in the viewer a desire to "caress" the face in the close-up, the crack-up exposes the film's "skin" (32). This fragility invites us to intervene "with surgical gloves" to examine images frame by frame (145), reanimating the inanimate and rediscovering the generative potential of a posthuman perspective.

By the end of Anger's book, one feels that the encounter with such minute material objects can illuminate a theoretical horizon that may appear crystallized but is, in fact, constantly redefined. Just as the case studies analysed rearticulate the relation between materiality and figuration, so too the relation between empirical analysis and theoretical speculation emerges as dynamic and unstable, yet profoundly productive.

The final chapter details a methodological proposal for researching Czech early cinema through videographic criticism, adopting those "deformative" (Mittell) and "parametric" (O'Leary) approaches based on the idea of making "the original work strange in some unexpected ways" thanks to the enforcing of more or less rigid parameters and algorithmic deformations (Mittell). As one might expect from a scholar who demonstrates great sensitivity toward the most experimental found-footage cinema and the ways in which it is often capable of revealing the ideological apparatus behind the regime of images, Anger's approach contends with the affordances of software and the ways in which they can limit our agency and predetermine results. They could affect both the aesthetic and hermeneutic potential of videographic practice, unless one maintains a critical and self-reflexive awareness. To achieve this aim and avoid "technological automatism", Anger proposes and adopts an approach that introduces the "performative into the deformative" through a tactic that foregrounds (163), not unlike the work of practitioners such as Johannes Binotto, foregrounds the often obscure and minute material dimensions of the images employed, thereby causing them to erupt into visibility. This eruption works precisely against technological and algorithmic automatism: rather than rendering images and their modes of manipulation transparent and frictionless, it estranges and defamiliarises both the images themselves and the very tools through which they are produced, processed, and manipulated.

This reflection is closely linked to the concluding remarks, which invite us to seek, even in academic writing, that balance between rigour and indeterminacy, between perfect

legibility and obscurity, that animates the objects encountered in the pages of the book. This suggestion further underscores the relevance of Anger's work for the film studies community: despite the highly specific subject matter, his study speaks not only to scholars and experts in early cinema and archive theory, but also to a broader readership interested in rereading images of the past with the tools of the present. These tools allow us to return to the primal scenes of cinema as well as to the cornerstones of theory, freeing them from a monumentalising and inert perspective and bringing them back to life despite—or perhaps even thanks to—what the passage of time has taken from them.

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