

“Not Corrected or Otherwise Manipulated”: Digitizing the Films of Jan Křítěnecký

Jiří Anger (ed.), *Filmy Jana Křítěneckého / The Films of Jan Křítěnecký* (Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2019).

In 2015, for the 50th anniversary of the original sessions, Impulse! Records released John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme: The Complete Masters*. Available in various formats, it featured the ground-breaking masterpiece in its final form as well as “all the surviving tracks from the two days in December 1964 when Coltrane recorded the music [...], including alternate takes, breakdowns, overdubs and studio chatter.”¹⁾ These surviving elements do not make for all the music recorded during that time — *Resolution*, for instance, is presented in its takes 4 and 6; we do not know what happened with the others — but they represent everything that, as of now, materially remains. Furthermore, the liner notes ended with a warning: as the producers of these discs went back to the original analog tapes, “Dropouts and other minor tape anomalies may be heard and are a by-product of the historical nature of this material, some of which derives from Coltrane's personal collection, and were not corrected or otherwise manipulated.”²⁾

One of the most interesting aspects of such a release is that it presupposes the existence of listeners able and willing to appreciate hearing successively seven different takes of *Acknowledgement*, and who derive aesthetic as well as historical pleasure in every material characteristic of the original artefacts — and the existence of enough of such listeners to motivate private companies not particularly interested in wasting money for art's sake. Of course, some may be fetishists desiring to own Coltrane's complete oeuvre rather than actually listen to it, but after all, fetishism may be a good place to start for a historian.

The editors of *The Films of Jan Křítěnecký* seem to have thought that there could be such connoisseurs of film history as there are of jazz. Indeed, the principles at work for these discs seem closer to the unearthing of these new masters of *A Love Supreme* than to traditional archival film DVDs. But their approach also shows that we may have attained a turning point with regards to the use of digital tools in the archives.

The works presented on these discs — one DVD and one Blu-ray disc — are of major historic importance. The earliest ones are the first Czech films, made in 1898, three years after the first films made with the Cinématographe by Louis Lumière started circulating in Europe. In the autumn of 1896, Jan

1) Ashley Kahn, *A Love Supreme: The Complete Masters* [booklet] (New York: Verve – Impulse! – Universal, 2015), p. 12.

2) Ibid., p. 18.

Kříženecký, by then a 28-year-old amateur photographer, saw a screening of the Lumière Cinématographe in a Prague hotel. With a colleague, Josef František Pokorný, he decided to buy one of the Lumières' machines, which they had begun selling to the general public in 1897. To amateur photographers, the apparatus was not entirely uncharted territory, and it was conceived as an autonomous, complete production system: the Cinématographe could be used as a camera, as a projector, and as a printer, allowing the user to produce a negative, print a positive, and exhibit the result to an audience. The two men also bought Lumière film stock, recognizable for having only one round perforation per image instead of Edison's four angular ones. Apart from his status as the first Czech filmmaker, Kříženecký represents another interesting historical case: he is among the earliest film operators to have worked with Lumière equipment without having been trained within the company.

With these tools Kříženecký shot several films for the 1898 Exhibition of Architecture and Engineering. All the surviving films are presented here. After that, and that is not one of his least intriguing traits, Kříženecký kept filming but only sporadically. After the 13 films from 1898, none remain from the two following years, only one from 1901, then nothing until one in 1906, one in 1907, six suddenly in 1908 — which exhibit important technical and stylistic innovations —, none in 1909, and one in both 1910 and 1911. After the 1898 coup, he seems to have in fact mainly accepted commissions and recorded local events: his most important works are his reports from the 1901 and 1907 Sokol rallies and from the 1908 Anniversary Exhibition of the Chamber of Trade and Commerce. After 1911, no films remain; Kříženecký was 43 years old.

The organization of the discs does not give a clear view of these gaps, nor do the essays in the booklet propose any explanation: interestingly, the texts do not focus on Kříženecký's biography — there is only a short contribution in the digipack that tells the basic story of his life. The essays rather detail the prominent aesthetic features of the films (Jiří Anger) and the specific digitization process elected for that corpus (Jeanne Pommeau). That choice reveals the clear emphasis the editors put on the materiality of the films rather than the circumstances of their production. Consequently, the films are not organized primarily according to the chronological order of their making, but in thematic sections: the first two gather documents about Prague life, one focused on the 1898 films, the second on the later ones. A third section then groups the "feature", "fiction" films, if we can call them that since of course these qualifications did not make much sense at the time — three from 1898, featuring and probably directed (in the modern sense of the term) by actor Josef Šváb-Malostranský, and one intermezzo made for a theatre play in 1906. A fourth part centers on the Sokol films — two from 1898, one from 1907, and one from 1908. However, these last two consist of newly assembled footage, so their presentation as single units can be misleading. The last section isolates two views of the František Palacký monument, from 1898 and 1911.

This thematic organization allows the uncovering of Kříženecký's main points of interest and contributions: filming his ever-changing city, exhibiting the collective athletic body. It also allows us to perceive the formal specificities of each corpus, the way the filmmaker approaches each type of object and the stylistic evolutions within what almost appear as genres of a sort. For instance, the views from the 1908 Sokol Rally as well as from the Trade Chamber Exhibition show important innovations, as Kříženecký's camera has gained an impressive mobility: he pans freely within the landscape or in front of the crowds and groups, which allows him to come a bit closer to the exercising athletes, and to isolate characters. Near the end of *The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague* (První den jarních dostihů pražských, 1908), we can follow a young girl and her family for several shots near the horse racetrack. She obviously has quite a bit of fun posing for the camera, with the complicity of her mother and fa-

ther. Finally, a photographer quickly enters the frame right in front of the operator to take a portrait of the family, revealing the interplay between still and moving photography. These 1908 new stylistic traits, probably connected with Kříženecký's tinkering of his Cinématographe to allow such pans, incidentally reveal a sustained interest in the Cinématographe's techniques that seems a bit at odds with the relative scarcity of his production during that time — or of what remains of it. We know, as is explained in Petr Kliment's filmed commentary with Jeanne Pommeau, included as a bonus, that Kříženecký modified his Cinématographe; it would be interesting to find out more about the precise history of these transformations, and how they interacted with his style.

But again, these questions are not exactly the heart of the discs' project, even though they certainly contribute to its richness. The real focus and contribution of this edition, as strikingly appears through the viewing of the very first images, is somewhere else.

The first film in the program is *Midsummer Pilgrimage in a Czechoslovak Village* (Svatojanská pouť v československé vesnici), and it is a shock for several reasons. Its framing is astounding: the image looks divided into almost separate zones, each featuring its own, independent actions and movements. On the foreground right, several couples are dancing, observed by a small crowd, with men and children walking and running in every possible direction. Behind them, at some distance, a two-storey carousel rotates continuously. On the left, young people are working at gymnastic apparatuses. The image as a whole presents a dizzying combination of movements, in a stunningly original composition that plays with depth in a completely idiosyncratic way, quite far from the stylistic traits associated with the Lumière canon. But besides all this, another thing strikes the spectator's eyes: the screen seems drowned in a rapidly-changing flow of blazing yellows, oranges and reds, with white lightnings sometimes crossing the image, while the right side of the frame shows a colored vertical bar with no photographic content, pierced with a stubborn abstract white crescent. After the first few seconds, the color seems to stabilize to a warm yellow, the image showing the more usual scratches of vintage film stock. Once the viewing is over, the same film is shown again, but this time in a more traditional and cleaner black and white. The relation with the "content", with the situation that the image is showing us, is completely different, due to the increased transparency of the medium, and its greater proximity with cultural preconceptions of how a film of that time should look. On the left-hand side, though, another vertical bar appears, black this time, within which a stationary white circle is delineated. The third film shown returns to the yellow tint, with the white crescent getting back in its place. The photographic image is pale, the silver grains seeming to fight for their visibility in a golden fog. The film shows a Corpus Christi march; its composition looks more Lumièrian, as the crowd approaches the camera diagonally. In the middle of the view, though, a few soldiers enter the left side of the frame to watch the parade; the closest one — called off by the operator, perhaps? — quickly moves back out of frame.

The reader may already have understood the reasons for the strange viewing experience I have just described. They are in fact clearly explained in the booklet by film restorer Jeanne Pommeau (Národní filmový archiv, Prague) as well as in her filmed comments included as a bonus. Their project, she writes, aimed at "the digitization of the preserved films of Jan Kříženecký", and to be more precise: "In this case, we decided not to use the term 'digital restoration'". This semantic precision describes in fact a quite radical set of principles, one that goes against the grain of contemporary dominant archival practices: "Since our aim was to preserve the historical value and authentic photographic quality of the films, digital retouching would not be appropriate."³⁾ The films have been scanned as they had been

3) Jeanne Pommeau, "The Digitisation of Jan Kříženecký's Films," in Jiří Anger (ed.), *Filmy Jana Kříženeckého / The Films of Jan Kříženecký* [booklet] (Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2019), p. 31.

preserved, at a 4K resolution, and then left as untouched as could be. The only operation allowed was grading, “performed so that the black and white photographic image was as discernible as possible”⁴⁾ but otherwise maintained in a general framework of neutrality. This meant that scratches and tears were not corrected, nor chemical alterations compensated for. What was aimed at was not a clean image, but something as faithful as possible to what the films are *today*, more than one century after their making. This is already a major historic statement, as it entails that the reference for the visual experience given to the spectator of these images will not be a hypothetical reconstruction of the original 1898 screening, but an experience that combines the discovery of the past with a sense of the historical distance that separates us from that time. Such principles have already, though rarely, been adopted sometimes in archival DVD editions. For instance, a final note in the booklet of *Fairy Tales: Early Colour Stencil Films from Pathé* (BFI, 2012, curated by Bryony Dixon) reads: “The transfers deliberately reflect the nature of the films as artefacts, *i.e.* as if they were museum objects, so that the viewer is seeing them as the archivist sees them without the intervention of digital clean up or restoration, straight from the can.”⁵⁾ This is certainly a question of historical accuracy and methodological honesty; but it also involves a specific aesthetic pleasure, produced by the foregrounding of the material qualities of the stock, of the image not only as an ideally neutral, invisible carrier of information, but as a sensual medium.

These principles here do not only concern the most visible aspect of image correction. One important decision has been not to adjust the frame rate. The digital transfer of early films has in fact been constantly facing a technical constraint: current standards impose that digital files are read at either 24 (Blu-ray, or the DCPs projected in the theatres) or 25 (DVD) frames per second, whereas, early cameras being hand-cranked, the original frame rates were notoriously undetermined, oscillating between 16 to 20, 22 or 24 frames per second. Usually, files are corrected to give the viewer a sense of natural motion on the screen. But that involves first deciding on a most probable rate, and then artificially creating the missing images so that the original 18 images — for instance — that made for a second are now 24 images. This was traditionally achieved by duplicating every third film frame; but then this would of course alter the fluidity of the original movement, the very structure of the film motion. Here, the restoring team decided that they would not perform such manipulations. Therefore, the succession of the images is left untouched, which implies a probable acceleration of the on-screen movements, but does not alter their flow — or rather alters them to the least possible extent.

Again, this could not be justified by arguing for a faithfulness to an original spectator’s experience. As soon as films are not shown through the original, historical medium and apparatus, this is unattainable. For instance, the Lumière Cinématographe is known for having produced an important visual flicker, mainly due to the shape of its shutter. The digital versions are completely devoid of such an effect. The respect here is given not to an ideal authenticity, but to the material artefacts that are the film prints. The digital system is there to grant a wider access to these objects, but it is used to the smallest possible extent, so as to preserve precisely what resists this digital media ecology and may still question it from the outside.

Probably the most striking aspect of this approach on the screen is the fact that the digital images have been framed wider than the original photographic framing, so that we can see part of the perforations. These perforations were of course never meant to be seen by spectators: they are part of the in-

4) Ibid., p. 34.

5) Bryony Dixon (ed.), *Fairy Tales: Early Colour Stencil Films from Pathé* (London: BFI, 2012), p. 24.

visible machinery. Their presence here is not the simple coquetry left for the fetishist early film cinephile; they make explicit that *film* is the matter here, not only the image. They are also an important visual reference, which allowed for another risky principle: image stability was not digitally corrected either. The visible steadiness of the perforation allows the viewer to get a sense of the only relative stability of the Cinématographe camera: if the digital image trembles, it is exactly *inasmuch* as the original images did, and you can actually *see* it — give or take the occasional fluctuation induced by the scanning process.⁶⁾ Probably for the first time, a digital version of early films can become a productive tool for the history of film technology, as it makes visible material aspects of historic cinematic machineries that were until now impossible to grasp concretely.

This principle of respect of the original artefacts brings another nodal aspect to the fore. It remains a quite little-known fact, outside of a rather small circle of specialists, that the Lumière films were most probably always projected not in black and white, but in yellow. According to scholar and restorer Camille Blot-Wellens, the reason for this could be to prevent piracy: films printed on yellow stock could not be copied on black and white negative.⁷⁾ As Jeanne Pommeau emphasizes in her filmed comments, this has been forgotten because the films have *never* been restored that way; after the first generation, later copies of the Lumière corpus were always printed on traditional black and white positive stock. Our imaginary of these films is definitely grey, not yellow. As Kříženecký bought his stock from Lumière, he got yellow-tinted positive: his films were also projected in golden light. The disc editors' non-interventionist stance allows this color to finally reach our screens, when a vintage copy has been preserved and digitized. But again, this does not pretend to be a reconstruction of the original tint: as chemical dyes are generally unstable, the yellow hue has since become sometimes orange or red, creating vibrant, ever-changing blazing effects. But it still hints at the historicity of a past film world that remains decidedly a foreign country.

But even more interestingly, the viewer can in fact, for a certain number of films, compare the scans obtained from these vintage prints and those obtained from the original negatives that were also preserved. This has several implications. Firstly, it gives the viewer a sense of the differences between these two artefacts: a vintage print, damaged by circulation and projection, coloured; and the original camera negative, black and white, used only within the laboratory when a positive had to be made, and as rich as possible in details. Secondly, the very fact that the “same film” is thus shown as two such different sets of images testifies concretely that a “film” is not an abstract work existing as the ideal synthesis of all its possible incarnations, but is first a thing, “like a museum object”, with its own life and its own material characteristics, impossible to separate from what it carries.

Indeed, this sophisticated viewing dispositif does not prevent from perceiving what these images show. Jan Kříženecký's films constitute as a whole a fascinating contribution to the cinema of their time, exhibiting variations on the well-known themes described by historians of the era. Like his colleagues across Europe, Kříženecký recorded major local events, whether religious ceremonies or official inaugurations assembling the notables or the common people. Like others, he was fascinated by movement, and often filmed cyclists or firemen at work. A young man sensitive to speed and modernity, he gave his own version of the *phantom ride*, these countless films where the camera was put in front of a train or car: his 1908 *A Ride through Prague in an Open Tram* (Jízda Prahou otevřenou tramvají) shows a beautiful, quiet and sunny city. A few couples and families are seen strolling around, as

6) See Pommeau, “The Digitisation of Jan Kříženecký's Films,” p. 34.

7) Based on a personal conversation with Camille Blot-Wellens.

the camera passes by with the smooth motion of the electric vehicle. Simultaneously, Kříženecký presented the changes to his hometown, as, in a second shot, in which the tram crossed the river via the Charles Bridge, thus using the line that, only a few years before, had replaced the last horse-drawn omnibus line in the city.

He also explored film techniques. In 1898, he filmed men and children playing at the Žofín swimming pool. The scene is obviously entirely staged: at first, only a few people dive in, but their number rapidly grows to complete chaos, together with the hilarity of the “actors”. At the end of these 50 seconds of fun, the last divers look with complicity at the camera before jumping — do you want more? —, revealing the game. As Kateřina Svatoňová explains in her video commentary, this film is supposed to have been exhibited in reverse: the bodies would seem to jump off the water to return to the shore. Louis Lumière had already used this possibility given by the Cinématographe to run backwards in his *Démolition d'un mur* (1896), where a wall is demolished and then magically reconstructs itself.

The fictions made with Šváb-Malostranský, who would later pursue an interesting film career as an actor as well as a director, are also fully of their time, staging for film typical vaudeville acts. These show how both men were fully aware of what was going on in the film world of the period. *Laughter and Tears* (Smích a pláč) is an interesting case: in 1898, such close shots of an actor's face, presenting “a study of facial expressions,”⁸⁾ would be quite rare — only a small number of other examples are known (and usually lost). This film belongs to the earliest manifestations of what theorists such as Béla Balázs would later consider as one of cinema's most ground-breaking contributions to cultural history: its capacity to make us rediscover the richness of the human face, the significance of facial expressions.⁹⁾

But certainly, the most characteristic part of Kříženecký's oeuvre is his Sokol movies. After having filmed them already in 1898, he made extensive reports from Sokol rallies both in 1907 and 1908. These collective athletic demonstrations make for perfect cinematic subjects, forming a spectacle of coordinated moving bodies. As is well known, cinema has from the start been deeply rooted in the then emerging sporting culture. Hungarian-born Georges Demený, who was a gymnast and an assistant of Étienne-Jules Marey before becoming a pioneer both of cinema and of physical education, is probably the most well-known figure attesting to that historical articulation between the disciplined, athletic body and moving photographic images. Of course, as Jiří Anger notes in his commentaries, the political dimension of these demonstrations can hardly be eluded today.¹⁰⁾ In any case, Kříženecký's films manage to give an impressive account of these performances involving dozens or hundreds of people. His taste for slightly raised points of view, already perceivable in his earliest films where the camera is very often positioned a little above human height, allows him to emphasize the monumental geometry of the groups' coherence while maintaining the presence of individual bodies.

Apart from Jan Kříženecký's works and the filmed commentaries that contextualize them (by Kateřina Svatoňová) or their technical specificities (Petr Kliment) and the digitization principles (Jeanne Pommeau), the discs also include interesting bonus works, in particular two 1912 films by Antonín Pech, notably the wonderful tinted and toned *St. John's Rapids* (Svatojánské proudy), which received a Great Gold Medal at the First International Film Exhibition in Vienna that year, and the two

8) Jiří Anger, “The Uncertain Oeuvre of a Czech Cinema Pioneer”, in Jiří Anger (ed.), *Filmy Jana Kříženeckého / The Films of Jan Kříženecký* [booklet] (Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2019), p. 29.

9) See especially Béla Balázs, Erica Carter (ed.), *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010).

10) J. Anger, “The Uncertain Oeuvre of a Czech Cinema Pioneer”, p. 29.

films directed by Šváb-Malostranský in 1913 (*Man's Five Senses* [Pět smyslů člověka], presented in the two surviving prints, one tinted and one in black and white) and in 1921 (*The Living Corpses* [Živé mrtvoly]).

The access given to Jan Kříženecký's films by this set of one DVD and one Blu-ray disc is important for the historic works it uncovers. But it is also nodal for the approach to the digital presentation of early cinema that it materializes. The attention to the details of the physical artefacts, the clarity with which the digitization methods adopted are presented to the viewer, make it an essential tool for anyone wishing to learn or teach about the material history of cinema. For the first time it seems, the early film amateur is addressed on the same grounds as the fan of John Coltrane's music: not as someone only interested in a clean and transparent account of what happened in front of the recording machine, but as one for whom each different variation between versions, every characteristic of the preserved medium, be they tape anomalies or scratches and altered tints, fully and wholly belong to the historical material's significance, and to its beauty.

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