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Negation and Contradiction in Kurt Kren's Films

A number of Kurt Kren's films turn on strategies of negation and contradiction. These strategies are often realized through the use of layering or partial obliteration as a way of cancelling the image, denying it the fixity, or positivity that it depends on for its representational power. Self-cancelling montage, as in *42/83 No Film*, and negative titling, as in *33/77 Keine Donau (No Danube)* are also deployed.

In *32/76 An W + B* Kren took a photograph of a window overlooking a Munich street and the park beyond it. He attached a large negative of this image to the lens hood of the camera through which the film was then shot. Over the period of a month he pulled focus so that different aspects of the scene become sharp. The focus pulling alters the relationship between the scene being filmed and the negative, which it is tempting to think of as a kind of reference image, but whose reference points are reversed, and which is itself subject to shifts in focus. The filmed layer - the landscape - changes constantly, both in terms of focus and density, as well as in the way things appear, such as pedestrians and cars, which are not in the photograph. However, our ability to measure these differences, to distinguish them from the photograph, is confounded, because the differences between the filmed scene and the photo, which is never visible in itself, generate only compound images that are negative in the sense that they partially obscure the differences between the photographed and filmed scene: a ghostly third image results from their interaction.

These interactions are different for different parts of the image. Where a static object is superimposed on itself there tends to be a persistent dark bluish area, most notably in the trees that dominate the foreground, whereas in the busier parts of the scene the patterning fluctuates. As they come into focus, bright edges and patches of sunlight punch through the negative and seem to emerge relatively unaltered.. This is partly because as the background is brought into focus the negative dissolves, thereby spreading and losing density, though still tinting the scene overall. When the

objects in the scene defocus they lose their distinctiveness, outlines dissolve, and as their colour and density come to dominate, they blur into the negative, which is itself always relatively soft: light is more evenly dispersed, so contrast diminishes. Thus from a more or less uniform process, complex unpredictable phenomena emerge: this is a characteristic of most of Kren's best films, including everything from *15/67 TV*, a straightforwardly shot film with permutative montage, to the anti-montage *18/68 Venecia Kaputt*, discussed below, in which painted material is superimposed on tiny fragments of film.

In Malcolm Le Grice's *Yes No, Maybe Maybe Not* (1967), a 16mm black and white negative and its positive copy are overlaid. This should produce an entirely self-cancelling image, but in fact produces a mid-grey texture that retains at least the outlines of a representation. While it may be possible to explain the existence of this vestigial image as the product of an imprecise superimposition of negative and positive, it could also point to the way characteristics in the negative film stock, its positive counterpart, and differences in the tonal values between negative and print, generate anomalies in relative densities, to say nothing of the way the eye-brain deals with information, often by exaggerating the boundaries between contrasting tonal areas, for example.

Kren's film incorporates other variables, such as the way focus pulling also affects the size of the image, and hence its constituent elements. These elements correspond to objects; trees, people etc, but one might additionally ask if the definition of an object can mean anything in this context: since the focus shifts continuously across different layers of depth in the scene, there are only momentary conjunctions of patches of light and dark, which may or may not be spatially contiguous, and may or may not sharpen into edges or points of light. In effect, focus shifts are really changes in the film's surface-movements, and in this respect the negative is a kind of moving image. This is one of the ways in which Kren breaks down the distinction between photographs and film: insisting on the fact that film is

made up of still photographs, while photographs themselves might become movie images when subjected to changes in focus and density.¹

The negative hanging in front of the scene is a reminder of photographic inadequacy and so, by extension, are films shown to be. *An W + B* expresses a resistance to the temptation to think of film as more adequate to its subject than a photograph, because of the added element of time and apparent motion. However, no quantity of photographs, presented singly or in sequences - here about 11,000 frames - can add up to a complete record of anything, and we grasp this from the constantly shifting, never repeating, array of tonalities in the work.

18/68 Venecia kaputt is an entirely different kind of film. *An W + B*, though very complex, runs at a pace that is slow enough for the viewer to register the shifting view on the park. Although all the complexities are impossible to grasp, the film is on screen for nearly eight minutes, so there is a sense of having time to take in the work, to accumulate a sense of what is there, at the same time as becoming aware that there is always more than can be absorbed. *Venecia kaputt* is very short at only twenty seconds and the division of the work into four sections enhances the sense of brevity. Furthermore, as in a number of Kren's films, the titles, at eleven seconds, last longer than the film itself, followed by the film, which consists of four brief fragments of less than two seconds each, separated by three or four frames of blue-on-black scribbles in the same colours as the titles and the end credit, the latter of which takes up the remaining three seconds.²

Not only do the opening titles dominate the work in a temporal sense, they do so visually too, since the same blobby blue ink that is used to create the titles and end credit is also superimposed over three of the four shots in the film, and to create the scribbles on the frames separating them. (The fourth shot has white scribbles). The

¹ Wilhelm and Birgit Hein, the dedicatees of *An W + B*, explored change of focus as movement and other related phenomena in systematic fashion in their film *Structural Studies* (1974).

² Three seconds is devoted to each of the opening title words: '18/68', 'Venecia' and 'Kaputt' are longer than the individual shots of the film itself.

blue graffiti appears not to have been applied directly to the film, but to be a superimposed layer: its lack of focus separates it from the focused imagery, which appears intact beneath the scribbles, not partially erased as one would expect from a scratched film. (The film looks as though it could even have been shot through the blue layer). Thus the titles, or at least the materials out of which they were made, negate, as it were, the film itself. The film is also dominated by words in the image proper. The camera points into a narrow gap between two buildings, beyond which can be seen a large ship with a chequered flag flying. On the left hand side of the frame is a large sign: 'Hotel Teson', in bold capital letters, while a similar such sign: 'Tratorria alla Bronsa' occupies a position slightly further away on the right. The framing shifts from shot to shot and the ship moves slightly through the frame. It takes several viewings to gauge these changes, which are partially concealed by the pauses between shots. This reminds us of how much is missed, or simply concealed, in most of the films we watch, especially if they are only seen once, as will often be the case. Here, Kren seems to be saying: if you can't take in a bare eight seconds of material, consisting of a repeating, static shot, what hope for most other films?

Even without the blue layer, the film would be difficult, and in this sense the layer is superfluous. If so, why is it there? It is partly a paradoxical act of cancellation, since one has to be able to see what has been cancelled to realise that it has been cancelled. Perhaps then the film is a negation of a negation, but one that does not lead to affirmation, unless what is being affirmed is negation again. If we can't take in what is in front of us, we might as well not be able even to see it properly, since if we could we wouldn't be able to absorb it anyway. Therefore it is better to experience the work in the only way possible, in the self-conscious sense that 'taking in' is impossible, seeing is impossible, or if not that, hopelessly - dangerously in some contexts - inadequate. And this is what cinema wants us not to notice. Here is the politics of *Venecia kaputt*. Perhaps this is connected to the decision not to scratch the film, a removal process that usually results in another kind of image untroubled by the issue of legibility, since the result is a new synthesis that may be understood in wholly aesthetic terms, often romantic-nostalgic, as in Bill Morrison's work, for

example. Kren's added layer retains the integrity of the filmed layer, while making it harder to read: a wholly opposite strategy.

42/83 No Film is one of the shortest films ever made. Although listed as being three seconds long, the two shots that constitute the film total only thirty-three frames, less than one and a half seconds at 24 fps. Like *Venecia kaputt*, text also dominates the work in various ways and, again, the title shot is the longest in the film, at forty-eight frames (two seconds). For all its absurd brevity, however, it is a fully formed film. It has a title cum front credit and two shots, one positive, one negative. The shots consist simply of the words 'NO FILM', in large block capitals, first in negative then in positive with the addition of a question mark. It's tempting to think of this work as a cryptic rejoinder to Peter Kubelka's films *Adebar* (1958) and *Arnulf Rainer* (1960), both of which have equal amounts of black and white in them. However, when the film is examined more closely this idea loses some of its plausibility. Firstly, the first shot, at twenty-four frames, is nearly three times longer than the second (nine frames), making the film asymmetrical overall, in contrast to Kubelka's. Secondly, the second shot, the positive version of the first, has the added question mark.

No Film's economy extends to its manner of production. All three cards from which the film is made; title, first and second shot, are almost certainly the same card. Although the title shot is framed slightly differently to the two succeeding ones, the framing for these latter shots is identical, as is the point size and font for all three. Presumably Kren made shot one, then two, by adding the question mark, then the title by removing the question mark and adding the credit and title information – '42/83' above and '© Kren' below the title word. This raises the question how the question mark was removed from shot two. Given it appears slightly lighter and slightly skew, it's possible it was stuck onto clear acetate, overlaid for exposure, and then removed for the title shot.

No Film is full of puns and contradictions. The meaning of the title shifts according to which word is stressed. The second shot partially cancels the first, insofar as it is

exactly derived from it in both a technical and semantic sense. In this sense it is parasitic of the first shot, even as it denies it. The denial is made imagistically – symbolically - as opposed to lexically, by putting the image (the same word) into negative. However, the addition of the question mark also answers the first shot by challenging it, as if to say: ‘what do you mean, “no film”?’ But it is also a question about what kind of film it is, and there’s a broader question about what film is. Does it need images? When, and in what sense, are words images, and does it need celluloid to be a film? It’s necessary to bear in mind that the last question at least is being asked in an era prior to the ubiquity of video, let alone digital media; Kren is exploring a deeper issue, here, than simply whether a film can be made in video, or whether video might be classified as film. The video era permits us to scrutinize these films in a way previously all but impossible. Yet the possibility of counting frames and computing measurements increases, rather than closes, the unfathomable gap between the object of film as a sequence of frames and its effects, even as, at the same time, the film foregrounds, in viewing, its construction from those very frames. While at a material level it is explicit in its forms of construction, the causal relationship between those frames and the effects generated remains elusive.

