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Strategies in Black and White

4/61 Mauern pos.-neg. und Weg (4/61 Walls pos.-neg and Way)

1961, 6:09 mins, b/w, silent

11/65 Bild Helga Philipp (11/65 Helga Philipp Painting)

1965, 2:29 mins, b/w, silent

4/61 Mauern pos. –neg. und Weg is mainly composed of black and white negative transparencies, shot in close-up, of areas of a crumbling, distressed wall riddled with staining and efflorescence. These are intercut with their corresponding positives according to a strict plan in which every frame is accounted for (see Aline Helmcke's essay in this book). The images are punctuated briefly by high angle time-lapsed views of a park, which is laced with paths along which people scurry. These five near-identical shots are interspersed, in decreasing duration, through the film.

The pixilated wall section contrasts in numerous ways with the framing and movement of people and tree-shadows in *Mauern*. Both images are planar, the former perpendicular to the camera, the other undulating and rising away from it. Thus, although the outdoor scene is viewed from an angle, there's the implication that, if it were viewed perpendicularly, the result would be an image as similarly abstract as that of the wall. However, in its existing framing the indistinct, ant-like movements of people, and the enveloping flow of tree shadows, signal two kinds of abstract movement in the scene, even as it remains representational: abstraction is both implied and actual in the viewing experience. In counterbalance to the park scenes, the patterns in the surface of the walls can be read anthropomorphically, as winking eyes, fetuses and faces etc. Here, then, an abstraction gives rise to representations, as a result of the spectator's imaginative projections. This tendency may then return us to the animated tree shadows that creep across the park, enveloping the walkers like a malign giant. There is thus a kind of circular movement,

whereby anthropomorphism brings representation back from even the most abstract image.

While the viewer may consciously flip between two perceptual modes in watching the park shots - in a similar manner to the duck/rabbit illusion - in the wall sequences this flipping is engineered by the cuts from negative to positive. (It is a time-based process structured into the film, in contrast to the park scenes where flipping takes place during shots, as opposed to between them). The a-rhythmic switching between negative and positive prevents the development of a regular kinetic flow or flicker effect. Every flip into positive posits and re-positis representation, only to negate it in the moment of the cut to negative. It is the cuts that do all the work here, as a special form of the Vertovian interval. Whereas Vertov's interval theory proposes an animating moment in the split-second jump from one image to a different, contrasting one, here the shift is from one image to the same, except that the contrast is absolute, because the tonal values are reversed. The cuts do not so much animate as disrupt, and the effects of them last as long, or almost as long, as a given image is on the screen, depending on the duration of that image. Thus shot and cut are in an explicit relationship of mutual efficacy that is explicitly more or less equal.

The cuts from negative to positive, and vice versa, have different effects, depending on the distribution of light and dark in the image, and depending on the relative duration of a shot and its counterpart. In some cases an image floods its counterpart with white, obliterating it, especially when the white image is only a frame or so in length. In others, pinpoints of light appear to blink out of a field of darkness, creating a 3D effect. The degree of flicker is also affected by the tonality of the images: a mid grey negative produces a similar positive, whereas a light negative gives a dark positive and vice versa. However, a mid grey solarisation effect is also frequently produced by the rapid flips from negative to positive and back. Towards the end of the film, Kren returns repeatedly to a strange frog-shaped stain on the wall: an image in the image, in contrast to the bas-relief of most of the shots. For once there is relative calm in a sequence dominated by disruptions that also turn on the small

but pervasive shifts of shadow generated by the bas-relief, as well as on the reversal of tonality.

For *11/65 Bild Helga Philipp*, Kren filmed a black and white geometric abstract print, part of one of a number of 'Kinetic Objects' - multi-image wall works and sculptures-made around the same time by the Austrian artist Helga Philipp.ⁱ The camera appears, most of the time, to be at an acute angle to the picture plane and frequent cutting generates a-rhythmic patterns that shift between stasis and quasi-movement in a similar manner to those in *Mauern*. The painting is flat, and arguably is about flatness in terms of its composition, yet it does invite the viewer to look at it from an angle, insofar as one cannot but be aware of the way the diamond shapes, of which it is composed, alter in shape and proportion as one glances across the canvas. This is different from the work of Bridget Riley, whose pictures occupy broadly the same territory, but where a frontal point of view seems to be more strongly required.ⁱⁱ After a few viewings of *Bild* it becomes apparent that there are sections that appear to be mirror-like, left-right framings of the same area of painting. It's tempting to think that the whole film has a palindromic structure, but closer examination shows that it does not. However, the effect of the way the film works is to invite a structural analysis that turns out to be all but impossible, unless one were to put the print on a bench and study it. This is because it is so difficult to register, let alone describe, the differences between one shot and the next, since it is mostly a question of small degrees of difference between near-identical formal patterns. But even if one could analyse the film in this way, then one would not be studying the 'film', but rather the filmstrip (and even this is no easy task as the illustration makes plain).

One might evoke here Peter Gidal's objection to what he called 'Steenbeck analysis', in which, by repeatedly watching cuts in feature films on an editing table, one was not thereby attending to the ideological effects the film produced when seen at normal speed. However, one could equally argue that such scrutiny is appropriate to this and other metrically structured films: there are not the ideological effects

generated from 24 fps illusionism in the way that there are in narrative movies; and it seems reasonable to analyse how they are composed, given that their compound structure is explicitly inscribed in the oscillation between stasis and apparent motion.

Bild is replete with effects generated by a number of factors including framing, scale, rhythm and repetition. The scale of the shots changes the way one sees the surface of the image and the degree of abstractness. This sounds absurd, because the painting is wholly abstract, but when the camera is close enough to it so that one can see surface marks and imperfections, there is a strong sense of seeing a film of something – a representation - whereas in the wider shots one has an experience of more or less surfaceless, or at least textureless, abstraction. The varied tonal range of *Mauern* is absent from *Bild*. Instead one experiences a play of relatively homogeneous patterned surfaces, with a more or less regular distribution, and even balance, of black and white shapes. As in *Mauern*, though, the film is also composed of an a-rhythmic stream of individual short shots that refuse to coalesce into movement. At the same time, there are also moments where Kren moves the (hand held) camera across the painting line by line - using it as a script, in effect - which generates hesitant, quasi-continuous movement.

However, the similarities in editing structure between the two films are more than cancelled by the way the heterogeneity of the material in *Mauern* creates constant interruptions and disruptions, in contrast with the homogeneity in *Bild*, which facilitates a more even and continuous flow. Thus we see how a similar editing pattern in two films can produce dramatically different senses of kinesis, flow and continuity, depending on the disposition of tonalities both within the frame and between shots. The negative-positive interplay of *Mauern* has a correspondence in *Bild* where, for example, a composition, or array, of black and white in one shot is followed by a white and black counter-shot with a similar disposition of forms. Thus the film invokes the idea of alternations of negative and positive counterparts through the act of framing. In this respect, we come to understand that 'negative' and 'positive' are not essential categories; they are only tonal arrays, the definition

of which depend on their relationship to each other in time and space, and other contextualizing factors.

Bild Helga Philip recalls, inevitably, Peter Kubelka's film *Arnulf Rainer*, in which equal quantities of black and white are systematically apportioned. Kren's strategy however is arguably more interesting for the way it confronts representation with abstraction. Within this so-called abstract film, there is frequently a sense, which is almost impossible to account for, that we are sometimes looking at the painting square on, and sometimes at an acute angle, even in the absence of clues such as drifting focus across the frame, which would indicate shallow depth of field across an object that was close, and at an angle, to the camera. Thus representation and the knowledge it supposedly affirms, is a central problematic of *Bild Helga Philipp*.

Aline Helmcke argues that *Arnulf Rainer*, composed as it is of black and white frames, is more radical, because purer, than *Mauern*. But pure abstraction can be seen as a retreat from the problems of dealing with representation. Kren's film clearly comprises filmed surfaces, yet he defies us not to see these images as abstracting: There is a process going on, neither the presentation of a representational image as graphic abstraction, nor pure abstraction, the latter of which deviates from a filmic problematic into the area of pure light play and kinesis. The constant oscillation between representation and its negation, coupled with their shared a-rhythmia, prevents these films from nestling in a domain of pure flickering light play. Rather, they insist on their being as films: they could not be otherwise, unlike flicker, which in itself could equally be generated by other means, such as a strobe lamp.

ⁱ See Katrin Draxl: *The Square in Motion*, in *Helga Philipp: Poesie der Logik*, Vienna and New York: Springer, page 12, with partial English translation on page 233.

ⁱⁱ I am grateful to Angela Allen for suggesting that Riley's black and white paintings invite a different approach from the viewer to her colour ones, because the colour interactions require a more or less frontal view to be experienced effectively, and in which a single event often unites the entire canvas, which similarly requires a frontal point of view.