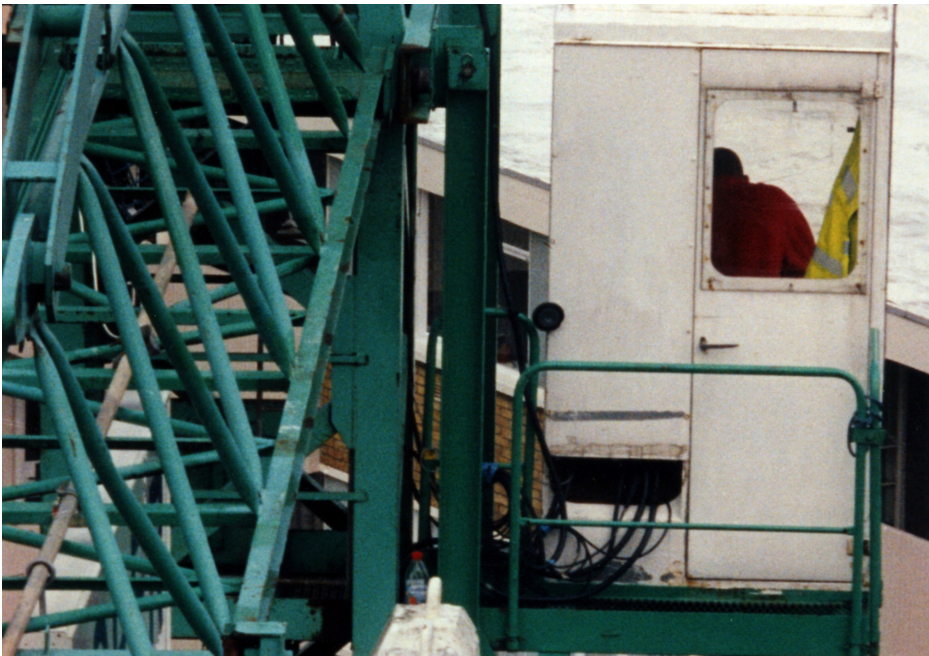


William English's *Ex Library* (16mm, colour, silent, 18 minutes, 2006) records a crane and its driver during operations on a building site in central London. The film was shot over eighteen months from English's flat near Old Street, on the western fringe of Hoxton. He used a Bolex camera with a 150mm telephoto lens to film the crane.



The title *Ex Library*, a pun that also refers cryptically to English's occupation as a dealer in publications on artists' film, comes out of a library's demise. The film was made during the period of transition between a nearby library's demolition and its replacement by a six story block designed to accommodate "key workers"; public servants whose modest salaries exclude them from the London property market. English films the crane, its cab, the comings, goings and workaday activities of its driver and, interspersed with this, the movements of building materials, ground workers and occasional birds.



The driver in his cab and the film camera are in a mutually defining relationship. Both are high off the ground: the film was shot from a 14th floor window, while the cab is a couple of meters lower, so that crane-cab and camera face each other across an uninterrupted expanse of London air. Each morning, the driver's arrival at his work prompted English to his task. The camera follows the driver ascending to his cab, removing his florescent jacket, lounging in his seat, making calls on his mobile and smoking cigarettes. He works, lounges and sometimes sleeps in a variety of uncomfortable-looking positions, and frequently leans out of the front window to talk to workers below, waving his arms across each other the while. He is a kind of homunculus inside a rectangular steel cranium. The condensation of his pattern of activities that arises through the film being shot at a frame rate many times slower than the normal twenty-four per second emphasises the repetitive behaviour in his routine, but we also become aware of his body language and his repertoire of postures: he comes to seem increasingly like the restless, twirling machine he inhabits, unavoidably bringing to mind Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*. At the end of the day he descends to the ground and the camera tilts down in response. This routine provides English with

a series of repetitions that are subject to numerous, often dramatic, variations occasioned by the weather, time of year, stages in the building process, seasonal character, quantity and colour of the driver's clothes and so on. Although it only constitutes a small amount of the total screen time, the regular up and down pattern forms a solid spine for the film's movements, against which the unpredictable and complex rotations of crane and shifts of light and shadow are contrasted. We also see occasional quasi-cutaways of straps billowing in the breeze, or bundles of building materials rising into the air, but as often as not these shots are filtered through views of the crane itself, or lead back to it by implication.



The crane appears to reach across to the camera, all but literally closing the gap between them, both implicating the camera in the construction of its spatial relationship with its subject, but also broaching the space between camera and subject, that space which is a sine qua non for photographic images, yet which is rarely acknowledged, let alone articulated.

The film's strategic parameters are tightly defined by a number of factors. The camera's tripod remained in a fixed position for the duration of the shoot, constrained by the window opening from which the footage was exposed. The crane's cruciform structure and the movements of its driver up and down his access ladder determine the path respectively of the repetitive pans and tilts. As if to allegorise this strategy of mutual determination, the camera at one point carefully follows a crow that hops a rectangular path around a section of the crane's armature.

The film was shot frame by frame, the rate being determined by the speed at which the driver climbs and descends his cab, and by the speed at which the crane rotates. English did not use a rigid system to determine the frame rate, in the way that classical time-lapse films invariably do. Instead he deployed a flexible method in which the number of frames-per-second was adjusted in response to changing rates of activity within the field of view. Thus the film is further locked into the nature of the activity within the pro-filmic scene.

Insofar as the camera's options of movement are restricted by the crane's shape, movement and human activity therein, the film is triply determined; spatially, kinetically and temporally, by factors not under the filmmaker's control. In this respect it bears comparison with Chris Welsby's masterpiece *Seven Days* (colour, sound, 16mm, 20 minutes, 1974), a (Welsh) landscape film in which the principle structural decisions are similarly determined by factors outside the maker's control; density, speed and direction of movement of cloud, the sun's path across the sky, length of day. The key factor to be determined (arbitrarily) by the film-maker was the frame rate. This was set at a regular frame every ten seconds, in contrast to English's variable rate.



Chris Welsby: *Seven Days*.

Compared to the vertical axis, over which the camera tilts fully, the lateral movements are relatively restricted. English could have panned out along the length of the crane's jib when it was square on to the camera, corresponding to the way he covers the vertical axis. However, he almost never does this, confining instead the bulk of the shots to moments when the jib is facing or rotating more or less towards or away from the camera, that is, when foreshortening is at its most pronounced. He thus establishes a strong formal contrast between the vertical axis, which is fixed roughly square on to the camera, and the horizontal, in which the constant mobility of the crane-camera and the extreme foreshortening generates an interplay between shallow, layers of skeletal crane, shadow, wall and windows. English pans, sometimes with and sometimes against the direction of the crane's rotation, thereby generating movements that reinforce the contrast with the up and down tilts. The work has its strength here, in the way it traces and retraces the inexhaustible complexity inherent in images generated from a single, fixed camera position, shot with a fixed focal length lens trained throughout on a small portion of space, interacting with a machine, which is lit by daylight and whose movements are confined to a single plane, thereby mobilising Siegfried Kracauer's question; "Does the spectator ever succeed in exhausting the objects he contemplates?" (1). There are also inadvertent effects to the film having been shot frame by frame -in time-lapse, by default- most notably the way the entire crane moves in the wind. Here time-lapse is both revelatory and transformative: revelatory in showing

movements not visible at the eye's normal speed and transformative in the way slow swaying is turned into weightless trembling.

Towards the end of the film, a new vista is opened up by a sequence in which the crane's reflection is observed in water lying on the flat roof of the newly constructed building. This image is subsequently dried away by workers with brooms and rags before they move on to seal the roof with blowtorches. In this sequence, we switch from images produced by the interactions described above, to images generated from natural phenomena –rainwater on a flat surface- to modifications to that image created unwittingly by workmen with brooms who are themselves part of the larger image created by English's camera. In both cases, images are generated by forces outside English's control.



The final three minutes or so is an extended coda, filmed with a wider, 75mm lens, in which the dismantling of the crane is recorded. At this point there is a shift into a relatively conventional documentary mode. In many respects nothing

has changed in the crane-camera setup, but now, because the camera's movements are no longer locked into those of the crane, the camera regains the autonomy necessary for its treatment of its subject as a subject, and not a collaborator. The change from a 150mm to a 75mm lens doubles the field of vision, establishing the crane in its broader setting, and further re-describing it as a subject.



Yet even as we watch this more conventionally documentary film, we become aware that another crane, out of view except for one brief moment, is being used to dismantle the crane of the film's subject. The tight, mutually defining interaction between crane and camera has excluded off screen space up to this point, because the film has established its own self-defining spatiality, its own logical boundaries. The mutually determining dynamic of the film has a strongly centripetal force, pulling our attention inwards to the endlessly complex interplay of crane, light, shadow and human movements, background detail, seasonal variations of light etc. This negates off-screen space, not by literally denying its existence, but by making it irrelevant to the film's formal logic.

Now, however, the background –the broader urban density beyond and around the crane’s field of action, comes into view. The film’s dynamic becomes abruptly centrifugal, the crane’s function as a crane in the larger urban fabric is contextualised, so that it is no longer an isolated mechanical phenomenon but a familiar tool (1). Just at this point, though, it is dismantled and removed, and space that has hitherto been obscured is further opened up. Its division into parts, even as it disappears before our eyes, also introduces another level of complexity; we see aspects of the crane that we haven’t seen, could not have seen, until now; new spatial configurations, operations and human-machine interactions. At this point, before the completion of dismantling that would allow the film a neat narrative ending, there is an abrupt cut to black.

The appearance of the second crane in the coda suddenly and dramatically emphasises off-screen space, which is literally enforced by the chains attached to the crane’s parts that lead out of frame to the unseen crane. There is also a kind of parallel between the idea of the crane constructing and deconstructing the crane of the film and the recursive structure of films like Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (a film that also has cranes in it, as well as other industrial machines), in which a second camera films the camera that also films the film. This structure is also enacted, in a slightly different way, in the section filmed in reflection, described above. Although these analogies can’t be pushed too far, they gain some force when joined to a number of other analogies that exist in the film; between the telephoto lens and the crane jib as extensible technologies that allow us to reach beyond our natural scope, between the film as composed of step-like frames and the steps, also rendered in a step like manner, of the driver up to his cab, and between the way the crane’s movements determine the camera’s, and the crane constrains the driver’s movements. The conjoined then separated (to be rejoined) pieces of the dismantled crane as unedited then edited shots, through to the aforementioned mutually defining structure of the film as a whole, in which two machines interactively generate images.

In much recent artists' video work the meaning of the image's referent is placed beyond question, the meaning already determined. The image is untroubled by epistemological difficulties, in order that its given-ness may free it to serve some other aim: poetic, allegorical, pseudo-ethnographic. *Ex Library*, by contrast, continues a tradition, exemplified by the kind of work initiated at the London Filmmakers' Co-op, in which the pre-given meanings of representations are questioned. *Ex Library* adopts this position by contextualising itself as a critical-reflexive documentary. Its subject is the efficacy of its own generational strategies. The status of its representations as exhaustive yet incomplete, in the sense expressed in Kracauer's question, and as specifically determined by its own production strategies, is inscribed into its methodology. It is explicitly and productively inadequate, in that its incompleteness points to a fundamental truth about the documentary limits of the photographic time based image.

1. Siegfried Kracauer: *Theory of Film*, 1997, Princeton University Press, page 165.
2. The idea of centrifugal versus centripetal derives from Rosalind Krauss's discussion of the grid in C20 Art, in *Grids in The Originality of the Avant Garde and other Modernist Myths* (MIT, 1985) and is deployed in relation to moving image work by Simon Payne in *Materiality and Medium-Specificity: Digital Aesthetics in the Context of Experimental Film and Video* (PhD dissertation, Royal College of Art, 2007).
3. William English's radio programme on Resonance FM is archived here, along with extracts from the film: www.williamenglish.com