

Crossroads

The Films of Bruce Conner

Program One

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presented with support from the University of San Francisco Film Studies Program

Introduced by Rebecca Solnit

Arguably the inventor of the “found footage” genre and the music video, Bruce Conner’s films are veritable x-rays of the 20th Century American mind, often representing struggles to come to terms with the cruelties of history and its mediated representation while describing collective fantasies and fears. Ultimately, they remain deeply personal, intimate and darkly elusive. Conner, famously distrustful of art world elitism, made films that were immediately accessible, immensely pleasurable, yet frequently highly critical (even condemnatory) of the culture from which they grew. They represent the thrills and spills of Conner’s seventy-four years. This two-part celebration of the work of Bruce Conner includes (nearly) every work completed by this highly original, deeply American artist, including rarities, recent works and other surprises. (Steve Polta)

Three Screen Ray (1965) by Bruce Conner; 8mm three-screen projection screened as single channel video, b&w, silent, 5 minutes

A three-screen version of *Cosmic Ray* originally presented as a sculptural installation based on three 8mm film loops (Source: *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II*)

Mea Culpa (1981) by Bruce Conner; 16mm, b&w, sound, 5 minutes

Music by David Byrne and Brian Eno from *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*.

A Movie (1958) by Bruce Conner; 16mm, b&w, sound, 12 minutes

“Along with [...] Cornell’s *Rose Hobart* (1936) Conner’s *A Movie* broke new ground establishing the art of found footage montage. Taking the bulk of the footage from Newsreels and other novelty films many released by Castle Pictures *A Movie* has an apparent humor that turns darkly ironical. Beginning with a madcap montage that could have been the provenance of Rene Clair or the Marx Brothers punctuated with ‘inappropriate’ credits that act simultaneously as structural reminders feigned mistakes prankish outbursts and dadist non sequitur, the film grows steeper and becomes a majestic lament for a world on the brink in the apocalyptic atomic age, an elegant telescoping of the destructive wishes and pursuits of mankind glimmering with ambiguous flashes of hope. [...] Perhaps more than any other single work of that generation *A Movie* was the film that launched a thousand ships.” (Mark McElhatten, New York Film Festival, Views from the Avant-garde, 2008)

The White Rose (1967) by Bruce Conner; 16mm, b&w, sound, 7 minutes

“Bruce Conner documented its move in [...] *The White Rose*, which he later subtitled ‘Jay DeFeo’s painting removed by Angelic Hosts.’ The [...] movie is an homage and a collaboration, an artwork about another artwork, as well as a lyrical documentary. It opens with establishing shots of the Bekins moving men milling around on the sidewalk outside 2322 [Fillmore Street], looking like doctors or monks in their white coveralls. Interior shots show the dark grove of spindly dead Christmas trees DeFeo had accumulated, *The Rose* itself, lit from either side like a shrine. It is slowly tipped forward, and a man, then a handful of men, came forward to bear its weight. As it shifts, it blocks out more and more light, until the men became silhouettes and only a halo of light surrounds it, like the sun in eclipse. It descends like Christ from the cross. Shadowy figures converge and disperse. Finally it is lowered by crane through the gouged-out window and trundled away. [...] Miles Davis’ *Sketches of Spain* is the soundtrack.” (Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era*.)

Report #3 (1964–68) by Bruce Conner; 16mm screened as video, b&w, sound, 13 minutes

In creating the 'final,' more familiar film *Report* (screening Thursday, March 19), Conner created seven earlier versions. Aspects of each of these versions were incorporated into the completed work. *Report #3* is one of these earlier versions. (Source: *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II.*)

Television Assassination (1963–64/1995) by Bruce Conner; 16mm, b&w, sound, 14 minutes

"[...] not only one of the best of Bruce Conner's film[s] [...] but is the strongest exposé of TV yet made; adroit use of TV-to-film black bars testifies to the 1st person singularity of [...] Conner's rephotography of the televised assassination, but in such a way that the terrible *content* of this event seems acted, phony, soap opera; whereas the true subject of the film—TV itself, its dead light, its eradicating glitches, wipes, electrical phosphorescence—appears to be assassinating EVERYthing in its visual grasp." (Stan Brakhage)

Take the 5:10 to Dreamland (1976) by Bruce Conner; 16mm, color, sound, 5 minutes

Valse Triste (1977) by Bruce Conner; 16mm, color, sound, 5 minutes

"Both [films] are works of profound feeling and mystery that seem to relate to both the "white surrealism" of Joseph Cornell and to Conner's own boyhood past, growing up with societal constrictions near oceanic wheatfields in Depression era middle America. Imbued with a longing transcending nostalgia the unexpected match-cuts and visual similes in both films seem to limn a system of magical correspondences of a secret world within our world." (Mark McElhatten, New York Film Festival, Views from the Avant-garde, 2008)

His Eye Is on the Sparrow (2006) by Bruce Conner; digital video, b&w, sound, 5 minutes

"Bruce Conner began working on *By and By* a documentary about The Soul Stirrers several decades ago shooting their reunion concert with four cameras and accumulating interview material. Conner was poised to finish the piece in the mid-'80s but the project was abandoned for a variety of financial and personal reasons. From the ashes of this project arises a new collage film miniature completed this year. [...] *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* takes its name from a classic gospel song written by Civilla D. Martin and Charles H. Gabriel in 1906 [...]. The Soul Stirrers cut their version in [...] 1946[;] it is this recording that is heard [...]. Carefree and complex the song moves in tandem with a set of found images that seem utterly transparent yet are evocative of other mysteries just out of reach." (Mark McElhatten, New York Film Festival, Views from the Avant-Garde 2006.)

Luke (1967/2004) by Bruce Conner; 8mm screened as video, color, sound, 22 minutes

"[...] a poetic film document created [...] in 1967 during one day of the production of *Cool Hand Luke* on location near Stockton CA on a country road." (New York Film Festival, 2004.)

Easter Morning (2008) by Bruce Conner; digital video, color, sound, 10 minutes

"[...] derived from the 8mm footage of *Easter Morning Raga* (1966). Conner originally showed *Easter Morning Raga* projecting at variable frame rates and with loops.

"*Easter Morning Raga* revisits the earlier material resetting it to a version of Terry Riley's landmark minimalist composition *In C* (1964) recorded by the Shanghai Film Orchestra in 1989. The use of traditional Chinese instruments in this unusual recording gives the music a shift in timbre that is revelatory, beautifully matching the radiance and open heartedness of this mind manifesting optical poem." (Mark McElhatten, New York Film Festival, Views from the Avant-Garde, 2008.)

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