



Good Skies Almost All the Time

Bruce Baillie Memorial Screening + Publication Launch

presented by Canyon Cinema and San Francisco Cinematheque

August 21 & 23, 2021 — Roxie Theater

San Francisco Cinematheque joins forces with sister org **Canyon Cinema** as they inaugurate **Canyon at The Roxie**, a monthly series of monographic screenings featuring Bay Area filmmakers past and present.

This inaugural edition of Canyon at the Roxie is dedicated to Cinematheque's and Canyon's founding filmmaker, **Bruce Baillie** (1931-2020), who brought to life exceptional works of film art and a thriving cinema counterculture. Beginning in the late 1950s, Baillie created a vagabond, romantic, first-person filmmaking style that continues to enchant and influence new generations drawn to the artistic possibilities of the 16mm film medium. Beginning with a visit to the filmmaker's editing bench and a few words from Dr. Bish himself, this memorial screening focuses attention on some of Baillie's lesser-known lyrical films (*Little Girl*, *Still Life*) and Canyon Newsreels (*Termination*), culminating with two of his distinctly different masterpieces: the expansive, densely-layered *Quixote* and the compact, elegant *All My Life*.

A wandering poet, Bruce Baillie was also an inveterate community builder. From the ambitious yet unassuming 1961 screenings presented by Baillie and friends in the rural East Bay community of Canyon, California emerged two essential institutions of American independent filmmaking: **San Francisco Cinematheque** and the **Canyon Cinema Co-op**. In addition to marking the 60th anniversary of these sister organizations, this program coincides with the release of Canyon's newest publication. *Dear Folks: Notes and Letters from Bruce Baillie* collects some of Baillie's many dispatches to and about Canyon Cinema, ranging from a 1962 announcement co-signed with Chick Strand to voicemail messages left on Canyon's office answering machine in the last years of his life. The bulk of this material derives from the Canyon Cinemanews, which began in 1962 as a newsletter to solicit and circulate "fugitive information" related to a fledgling independent film movement. Years before Canyon was formally organized as a distribution cooperative, the lively pages of the Cinemanews demonstrated that there was such a community of filmmakers to be incorporated. (Canyon Cinema)

Introduction to the Holy Scrolls (1998) by Bruce Baillie; video, color, sound, 10 minutes, exhibition file from Canyon Cinema

Bruce Baillie edits film and talks to the audience. This video work was often used by the filmmaker to introduce, in his absence, film programs scheduled in distant venues. Created also as an formal introduction to an 11-hour archival collection of unfinished films. (Canyon Cinema)

Show Leader (1966) by Bruce Baillie; 16mm, b&w, sound, 1 minute, print from Canyon Cinema

A repeated shot of me in a stream talking to the audience, used as an introduction to Baillie film programs. (Bruce Baillie)

Little Girl (1966) by Bruce Baillie; 16mm, color, sound, 9 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

This film by Bruce Baillie, completed in 1966 but unreleased until 2014, is contemporaneous with *Castro Street* (1966), but is much more formally connected to *All My Life* or *Still Life*, also from the same year. In three sections with three different formal strategies, Baillie shares distilled moments of found natural beauty as he encountered them in the North Bay outside San Francisco. The first section features a study of plum blossoms, rendered in rich, multiple superimpositions that allow the white flowers to explode into a blizzard of visual complexity, framed by a panning shot of

purple mountains. In the second section, Baillie allows us a furtive glimpse of the titular little girl, waving to cars with her dog on the side of the road, lost in her world and thoughts. Bruce's framing remains unadorned, feeling no need to add to or take away from a beautiful piece of simple portraiture. The third section, of waterbugs on the surface of a pond, remind us how remarkable and sensitive Baillie's camerawork can be, as he observes their graceful dances, and the subtle light and water effects they produce by their movements. (Mark Toscano)

Termination (1966) by Bruce Baillie; 16mm, b&w, sound, 5 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

[Paul] Tulley and I made this film for some people up at the Laytonville Rancheria. They were being "terminated" under a new Bureau of Indian Affairs program. (Bruce Baillie)

Still Life (1966) by Bruce Baillie; 16mm, color, sound, 2 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

From the commune life at Morning Star, where I made *Castro Street*. (Bruce Baillie)

Quixote (1965) by Bruce Baillie; 16mm, color, sound, 45 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

One-year journey through the land of incessant progress, researching those sources which have given rise twenty years later to the essential question of survival. (Bruce Baillie)

All My Life (1966) by Bruce Baillie; 16mm, color, sound, 3 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

"Singing fence," Caspar, California. One continuous moving shot. Ella Fitzgerald singing "All My Life" on the soundtrack. (Bruce Baillie)

HOMAGE TO BRUCE BAILLIE (1931-2020)

Artists help us learn to see and hear; they remove webs of expectation that stand in the way of engagement and contact. The great artist and human being Bruce Baillie died on April 10, 2020. Baillie was one of cinema's greatest observers, an artist fully responsive to the realities of the world and the meanings underlying the surfaces of its phenomena. Baillie's 16mm films and home videos speak eloquently to their time and revitalize the magical essence of cinema.

Here is work that documents the American landscape, marginalized people and outsiders, astonishing details recorded from daily life, material that is transformed by his poetic sensibility, creating multiple layers of meaning. They balance stinging social critique with subjective responses. Each work rewards repeated viewings.

Baillie came of age in the early '60's when "nonprofessional" 16mm film was the medium of choice for young people trying their hand at filmmaking for personal expression. The portability of 16mm film encouraged a language of intricate editing, multilayered images, handheld camera movement, unorthodox uses of film stocks and quick shifts of focus.

Its versatility allowed Baillie to master intricate compositions and complex structures. Ravishing colors, refined textures and subtle plays of light seem to make physical contact with each viewer. Motifs reappear with renewed meaning: watchful eyes; the unbounded sea; birds in flight; the freedom of horses and animals; the innocence of children playing; lush flowers and grass.

Baillie's richly layered musical soundtracks especially move me. Each seamlessly weaves together sounds recorded on location into tapestries that richly reflect and amplify the images. They are high points of creative sound in cinema.

A list of his major 16mm films includes *To Parsifal* (1963), *Mass for the Dakota Sioux* (1964), *Quixote* (1964-65/revised 1967), *Castro Street* (1966), *All My Life* (1966), *Valentin De Las Sierras* (1968), *Quick Billy* (1970) and *Roslyn Romance (Is It Really True?)* (1977). I have been studying these films since 1969, making new discoveries with each viewing. A few brief descriptions suggest his range of themes and strategies.

Quixote is a harsh critique of mid-century American life as witnessed on a road trip across the country. "I pretty much emphasized the picture of an American as a conquistador." It is also a celebration—of rural landscapes, urban life, ancient cultures and myth. A spectrum of characters appears: Native Americans, laborers, immigrants, homeless people, athletes, cheerleaders, businessmen and circus performers. Hypocrisy and nobility are contrasted in a series of pointed sound and image montage.

All My Life lasts only three minutes and consists of a single pan moving across an aging backyard fence, hugged by grass, weeds and a rose bush. A 78 record of Ella Fitzgerald singing "All My Life" accompanies the image. Baillie's deceptively simple film offers a deep meditative experience, a cleansing of perception and expectation. The film's two-dimensional world is limited and confined—but it is still full of infinite wonder. *All My Life* is one of the most universally beloved avant-garde films.

A masterpiece of condensed structure, *Valentin de las Sierras* portrays rural life in Chapala, Mexico, in ways that deny hierarchical perspective. Remarkably compressed, *Valentin...* is composed of close-ups detailing gestures and daily rhythms: hands scrubbing, a guitarist playing, ancient faces, children and animals. *Valentin...* isn't romantic or sentimental. Baillie's eye is attuned to the severe terrain and hard labor needed for survival. The soundtrack, a landmark achievement, becomes equal partner in this immersive experience.

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Community was crucial in Bruce's life. He loved people regardless of their class or background, and informal gatherings remained central to his life. He was irreverent in undercutting pretentiousness and decorum, living with Zen spontaneity and being in the moment; his interactions bore this out throughout his life.

In 1961, bemoaning the lack of independent exhibition venues, Bruce started Canyon Cinema, 16mm backyard screenings in Canyon, California. Neighbors with children and dogs were welcome, people drank beer and relaxed. Programs included whatever Bruce, and his soon-to-be collaborator Chick Strand, could find: cartoons, features, newsreels, avant-garde classics and work by local filmmakers. A 1962 program handout stated: "Some of the films will be bad. This is new work in a difficult medium... As new film work matures we will become more selective." Bruce wasn't a tastemaker, preferring an easygoing tolerance seemingly at odds with his meticulously crafted and rigorous films. This openness remained his underlying philosophy.

After decades of living in transient poverty Bruce moved to Camano Island, Washington, and began a family with his wife Lorie. He had been living with hepatitis for decades, so his energy was severely limited. Embracing video primarily as a performance medium, Bruce began chronicling his life, including delightful sendups of radio comedy and melodrama. These videos couldn't be further from the aesthetic that earlier produced the remarkable stream of 16mm films, but in the best, among them *The P 38 Pilot* (1990), *Commute* (1995) and *Salute* (1999), Bruce's wisdom, wit, humanity and presence are timeless.

Bruce Baillie was a key figure of American cinema, and his passing is a reminder that the pioneering era of avant-garde personal filmmaking is slipping ever more quickly into the past. Bruce was a source of inspiration for many generations of younger artists, and he will be greatly missed. (Steve Anker. Originally published in *Millennium Film Journal* #71/72, Spring/Fall 2020)

Notes on *Quixote* and *All My Life*

Quixote (1965) by Bruce Baillie; 16mm, color, sound, 45 minutes

Quixote is Baillie's most expansive exploration of American culture, a road movie in which he journeyed for a year through parts of the country observing the land and the people. The resulting film is a harsh critique of dominant mid-century values. "I pretty much emphasized the picture of an American as a conquistador. A conquering man," he said. It is also a celebration of rural landscapes, urban activities, ancient cultures, an exploration of myth versus actuality. The spectrum of characters includes laborers, native peoples, immigrants, athletes, cheerleaders, businessmen and circus performers. "Like the Cervantes novel itself," Baillie said, *Quixote* is "filled with chapters, dialogues, songs. Some parts discrete, others continuing, in varied form, into new sections." An invisible observer, the "poet-hero" (on some level Baillie), wanders from place to place, idealistic but unable to stop the painful truths the camera reveals.

The first image is startling: an extreme black and white close-up of an old man's unruly white beard, pockmarked face and worn-out cowboy hat. In perhaps the only lip-synch shot in Baillie's later films, the crusty man recalls a memory, possibly a fantasy, about a secret meeting with members of the Mexican revolutionary army and their pathetic artillery ("no four wheels were alike, no two men were armed alike"). This irascible man and his confrontational image set the tone for the film.

In a rapid-fire montage of roadside billboards whizzing by in the Southwest desert, ads for beer, motels and local political candidates lead to a large billboard of Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. Distorted details of Goldwater's face accompany his voice: "Only the strong can really breathe, and only the strong can keep the peace." Cut to a new location and theme, as a crop duster moves across a field, spraying chemicals directly over the heads of migrant workers. An elegant portrayal of the men hard at work begins and close-ups follow their skilled and graceful movements harvesting vegetables. These loving compositions reveal a deadly import: a wider view shows the workers against a large factory and smoking chimney in the background.

Motifs and symbols reappear through the film, allowing Baillie to weave a constantly renewing polemic: planes (dust croppers, war planes) controlling from above; cops maintaining order; cars, trucks, snow tractors intervening in the landscape; horses and other animals running free; the watchful eyes of people and animals; small but tough desert

creatures (tortoise, tarantula, fly); ritualistic actions, such as children playing, classical musicians waiting to perform, young white basketball players and their cheer-leaders; images of empty and inhuman business culture; subtle movements of a martial arts master contrasted with the overlay of a superhero comic; clips from stupid early television commercials and old B movies. There is visual nuance to each image, and shots flow with an unforced transition. Shifting from black and white to lush color, Baillie shows ancient cliff-dwelling ruins and active pueblo huts with children playing on top of stone steps. Apaches are seen performing (for tourists?) in ceremonial dress, superimposed over hut interiors and local landscapes. An eagle flying in the frozen woods leads to a close-up of hands rolling a cigarette, then the camera lingering respectfully on the weathered faces of two Native American men seated in a diner, dressed in ordinary clothes (glasses, cap, overcoats), in contrast with the colorful Apache dancers. As they smoke and talk casually (their language heard on the track), one glances occasionally at the camera.

A beautifully composed series of images portraying New York City street life largely focuses on laborers in action. This leads to the concluding nine minutes, an urgent web of compressed and pointed black and white superimpositions. It is impossible to convey the complexity of this sequence in words, but its weaving of New York's multi-ethnic life with images of Civil Rights marchers on the barricades in Selma, Alabama; of Vietnamese women weeping in embrace, a black woman's distressful eyes, and a white woman's face in ecstasy; of a glimpse of an ideal American family interrupted by raised hands of the marchers stands as a time capsule and political indictment of the moment.

Baillie uses techniques from earlier work with greater depth and formal complexity in *Quixote*: metaphorical editing and multiple layering, or cutting to make polemical points; close-ups delighting in visual rhythm, texture, color, and light; handheld fluidity; and intricate sound collaging. *Quixote*'s unbroken stream of details demands concentration and quick perception, a far cry from normally passive movie watching. The film is not orderly, and improvisational techniques combine with dense structure to give an appearance of randomness and cacophony. That is the point: the film retains an original sense of immediacy and urgency. Upon the repeated viewings that are owed to any real work of art, *Quixote*'s mysteries reveal themselves as a precise language. (Steve Anker)

All My Life (1966) by Bruce Baillie; 16mm, color, sound, 3 minutes

All My Life takes less than three minutes to watch—yet is one of the most perfect and satisfying films ever made. Offhanded in its simplicity yet elegant and profound, it challenges the viewer to be fully present (regardless of how many times one has seen it) and to make discoveries in a narrow world that appears mundane and familiar.

By limiting himself to a single roll of 16mm film, Baillie predetermined the final three-minute length. His aim was to frame and gradually reveal a typical backyard (one he had been watching for days) so that the natural light and innumerable details would be transformed into a field for concentrated perception. Unusual in Baillie's body of work for its directness and unwavering focus, *All My Life* is also a great, early "structural" film that combines disparate picture and sound elements into an irreducible new entity.

The imagery consists of a single pan (mirroring the single roll) that keeps objects true to their original space and original relationship, even as they are flattened and magically transform. Everything is seen against a deep blue sky, richly outlined in highly vivid color. The pan moves right to left with a steady rhythm across an aging vertical backyard fence with occasional missing boards. An old record plays a piano solo as grass and weeds are seen clinging to parts of the fence. Suddenly a throaty woman's voice (Ella Fitzgerald) begins the title song: "All my life/I've been waiting for you/My wonderful one/I've begun/Living all my life . . ."

A deep red rosebush envelops the fence as the camera pans and the song continues; then a second, denser rosebush appears, with the hint of a power line running above it. An insect darts in and out, and, after a third rosebush comes into view, the image tilts toward the sky, passing the first power line and revealing a second more defined one. The tilt continues until it reaches the sky in solo. The music ends, the noise of the old record's surface continues, and the film's title appears.

What might have been an image of dingy neglect becomes a transcendental experience. Baillie has created a rich interplay of color, form, and dimensionality that pivots among seductive surfaces, a sense of nostalgia, and the disillusionment of hopeless neglect. The lush, uncontrolled growth of flowers clashes with the containment of the fence, a dichotomy further echoed by the power lines that divide the blue sky. Yet this deceptively simple film cleanses our perception and expectation; we have only the limited view of a narrow world, but one that is full of infinite wonder. (Steve Anker)