

CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART

ONE OF THE FOUR CARNEGIE MUSEUMS OF PITTSBURGH

Independent Filmmaker, Bruce Conner, Lecture, Part I

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Bruce Conner:(Harmonica music) [00:02:00] [00:04:00] [00:06:00] I used to try to practice that one hand clapping. That's sort of the zen-ful thing to do, though. It's such a [craft]. I have ten films this evening, that I had made between 1958 and after the program, it's ten films, I'm going to show a film that presently is work in progress. The ten films, I don't know if you've got a list of them there or you heard about them before. The order of the films this evening starts with a *Ten-Second Film* which I made for the New York Film Festival.

I made a poster for the New York Film Festival, which was made of ten strips of film, each 24 frames long, which gave all the information of the Film Festival in it. Then I spliced it all together as a commercial for New York Film Festival. They never wanted to use it. They said it went too fast. It couldn't possibly go any faster, it goes 24 frames a second, just like any other film. It's followed by a movie of my friend Vivian which was made in 1964-65 followed by *Permian Strada*, a film regarding a great period of upheaval in the history of the world and [00:08:00] sound by Mr. Robert Zimmerman.

Followed by *Cosmic Ray*, which is the second film that I made, and two-thirds of which I shot myself and the other third is parts of other movies. I made that one in 1961 and on the strength of that film and the film which follows it in the program, *A Movie*, I got a Ford Foundation grant in 1964. *A Movie* was my first film I made in 1958, finished it in '58. It really started in my mind when I was about 11 years old, when I saw a Marx Brothers movie where they're in a mythical kingdom and the revolution is going on.

Groucho tells Harpo, "We need help." Harpo runs outside, puts a "Help Wanted" sign on the door, closes the door and all of a sudden there's tanks and airplanes and soldiers and alligators and ostriches, all of them rushing to help them. After that, every time I'd go to a movie, I'd start thinking about, well, we can add a train going through here, or this speedboat. Then it got more complicated. I started thinking, well, I could use Marlene Dietrich walking through this door now and I could superimpose on it the words of Frankenstein at the end of *The Bride of Frankenstein* ... doing all sorts of fantastic movies in my head of stock footage.

I kept that in my mind for a long time. Finally, when I got around to making that movie, I found out how difficult it was to get the footage, so I bought a lot of Castle home movies and started working out what I could out of them. Since I couldn't afford to make a movie with movie equipment, which I didn't have, I borrowed Larry Jordan's editing equipment and spent 2 weeks splicing it.

Every time I'd splice a bunch of it, I'd [00:10:00] run it on a projector and turn on the radio to see what happened with the sound. Because the idea I had in mind then, I was doing a lot of assemblages and collages, so I wanted to build a sort of little room box with mirrors and tape machines and video television sets and tape recordings and this movie, which would go on continuously.

Every time it'd go through, there would be different sounds on tape, radio sounds, music. So that every time you saw the images, which sort of played off of each other, it would be a different context. It would be a brand new movie every time.

But then I found out how expensive all of that rear projection equipment was and abandoned that and actually turned it into a movie. And it's a real movie, has everything a movie is supposed to have: sex, violence, spectacle. Film after that is not really a film, it's a kinescope from a video tape, a five-minute excerpt from a video tape I did at KQED in San Francisco of Michael McClure, a friend of mind, poet. It was poem called "Liberty Crown," it was an 18-minute videotape and I made a kinescope of this five-minute segment of it.

So actually there was no filming, it was all done with video equipment. Everything happened exactly in sequence the way it is in the film. Following that is 1967, I made a film called *The White Rose*. It was painting by Jay DeFeo, who started painting a oil on canvas painting. It must be about 12 feet tall, and it weighed a [00:12:00] ton by 1965. She worked on it for 7 or 8 years and that's all she every worked on. The paint ended up being this thick in places, all oil paint. When she and her husband were being evicted from their apartment, they had to tear out the wall to take it out, and it was a big moving problem, so the Pasadena Museum paid for moving it.

[I] had always known they were going to have to tear out the walls and do an elaborate moving job. I'd planning on making a movie for years. I made the movie of the painting being removed by the Bekins. I know ... A little background on that might be, that Jay was in a group show at the Museum of Modern Art, I think about 1956 or '57, *Twelve Americans*. Everybody considered to be a very important painter. After 1957, she didn't start any more paintings except this one painting, which was originally called "The Death Rose."

It finally ended up that she never started another painting at all. Every year the painting would look different. It always had basically radiating lines from a central point. It originally started with wedge shaped forms that were built up with paint, using black and white paint. She finished it and somebody said, "You could get the same effect with less paint." So she started taking the paint off. Then I went off to Mexico and I saw a picture of it in *Realities* magazine. It had changed and sort of had build-up in areas and looked like acanthus leaves, moving around.

She did lots of paintings on the same painting, but by 1965, her only identity with any kind of exterior reality was with that painting. She was very crazy. You couldn't talk to her and get any sense out of what she was saying. Words would pivot in the middle [00:14:00] of a sentence. I could listen to her talk for half an hour and never have the slightest idea of what she was saying. It was really a very difficult situation for her. The painting was moved down to

Pasadena and she was supposed to finish it there. She went down there for 2 or 3 months and practically made the museum director go crazy. She got kicked out. The painting was finished because she never really finished it, but she just stopped.

The film following that is a documentary I did of the assassination of President Kennedy. Maybe I'll talk about that after the program. A short [teller 00:14:49] film that I started in 1960 and finished in about 1967, finished editing and putting a soundtrack to it, *Looking for Mushrooms*, of when I was looking for mushrooms in Mexico in 1961 with Timothy Leary. Part of it I shot in San Francisco before then, part of it I shot there. For approximately one-fifth of a second, you will see the back of Timothy Leary somewhere in the film.

The final film in the program is *Breakaway*. Song is sung by Antonia Christina Basilotta. She dances in the film. That tells you what the program is. Do you remember any of that? Some of the problem is that I don't always put titles on the films. So they don't always tell you when it's the end or what the name of the film is. But they usually let you know in themselves. One time I had my name on about three frames of film in *Cosmic Ray*, and as I kept [00:16:00] editing it got shorter and shorter until finally it disappeared.

OK. Joe? Let's run the films.

(Harmonica music.) That's the end. I think the best way I could talk would if people would ask me questions. Yeah.

Audience: How many different versions are recorded [inaudible 00:17:29]

Bruce Conner: When I was editing *Report*, every time I'd make a print, I'd re-edit the film. It probably could have stopped at any point along the line, but I think probably it didn't stop because, since the film has something to do with the exploitation of the man's death, by actually stopping the film and putting it out as a commercial film, or that people can rent, [00:18:00] was sort of like participating into it. In that ritual of keeping it going, it took about two and a half years to do that. This is the eighth version. It was always the same length. The soundtrack remains the same.

The imagery at the last part was kind of similar. There were some variations, but mostly what happened was the first eight minutes would change totally. The first four prints were repeats of the same image over and over for eight minutes. Like, the different ones that you saw on the screen there, one of them would be carrying the rifle down the hallway, repeating over and over for eight minutes while you listen to the soundtrack of the man's death. Another one was Jacqueline Kennedy going up to the car, trying to open the door of the ambulance, which is locked, and stepping back.

One is the motorcade going by over and over. The leader numbers. There was another one where she walked to the casket in state and kneeled down in front of it, kissed it, and walked back. At the same point where she started from, she ended up and then it'd start back again. It was sort of a perpetual movement. In the background of that one, which I didn't really save it in the final print, but you could see in the crowd behind there Bobby Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson and all kinds of people that you could identify and what their reactions were during that moment. When I made the film, it was within a year after he was killed.

Audience: [Inaudible [00:19:52]. [00:20:00]

Bruce Conner: No, I never had any problem with having it shown personally. Other people might have had problems with it. I had problems of some very strong reactions from some of the Audience. Usually there were people who said, "I never voted for the man, never cared for his politics, but this movie is sacrilegious and demeaning to the memory of a President of the United States." And they'd be livid, ready to poke me out. They'd tell me it was in bad taste, which it is, because it's about bad taste. It's also about the whole experience of going through that period of time when the only thing you could see was the death and they would replay scenes over and over, all the time, on television. Which is part of the reason why there are all of those repeats, over and over.

Audience: [Inaudible 00:21:05].

Bruce Conner: Pardon me?

Audience: I remember [inaudible 00:21:07].

Bruce Conner: Yeah. I was living in Brookline at the time he was shot. He was born in Brookline about a mile from where my house was, and there was a grave site reserved for him in Brookline. When he was killed I decided I would live there for the next two years and work on the film about what would happen when he was buried there and how the city would change and how it would be exploited. I would go to the grave site every day with my camera and film it.

Partly that's the reason why the film didn't get finished for two years because I kept to that determination. Then, of course, they took him away. Some three months later, I went to New York to try to get CBS, NBC [00:22:00] to try to get footage of the day he was shot and I wasn't able to really get it. They made it really difficult for me, mainly just shuttling me from one place to another. It became clear that they were very nervous about letting anybody have any of the film. So I waited until the end of the year and got Castle home movies and started cutting them up.

On his birthday, which was March, after the November assassination, I got in my car and drove towards the house where he was born, close to the time,

minute and the hour that he was born, on that afternoon. As I was driving, the radio was on in the car. News was taking about, there are thousands of people in Washington at the grave site today, on Kennedy's birthday. There are hundreds of people at the place in Dallas where he was killed, observing his birthday, and that there were commemorative stamps coming out that day.

As I was traveling there, I went through this intersection in Brookline that seemed to be crowded. I thought there might be a lot of people going there. But after I got through the intersection, there wasn't anybody really going that way. I turned down the street, and there were a couple of kids playing out in the street, throwing Frisbees, and nobody else. While I was there, one man came down the street and walked along like there wasn't any reason for him to be there. He wasn't walking past the Kennedy birthplace, but as he walked by, he glanced at it real quick and went on. At that moment, at that time of his actual birth, I was the only person standing in front of his house. I felt that was ... Well, I felt [00:24:00] a lot of different things at that time. Clearly, everybody was celebrating his death. Nobody was really celebrating his birthday.

Audience: I'm curious to know if there was [inaudible 00:24:13]. I have the feeling that had I not seen the [inaudible 00:24:17] explanation, [inaudible 00:24:19].

Bruce Conner: It was almost like that. It was like a loss for her. It was clear that it was stopping. At that time, she was really very crazy. She could have been locked up. I don't know. It was such a powerful moment in her life. It was like somebody that was dying. It was like her life that was moving away from her.

Audience: [Inaudible 00:24:53].

Bruce Conner: There were a lot of different things happening there. I see a lot of different ways. Parts of it is just a little bit tongue in cheek, the seriousness of it. Or forcing it into a kind of theater, which is wasn't, by selecting segments of it. One of the things was, every year that she was working on the painting, she saved a Christmas tree. I didn't tell her to go take the Christmas trees anyplace, I didn't direct her to do anything, but she started taking out the Christmas trees and putting them in the windows. She was celebrating it. Yeah.

Audience: Can you talk about the events leading up to and surrounding the filming of [00:26:00] *Looking for Mushrooms*?

Bruce Conner: The events leading up to, surrounding? I was born in 1933 in McPherson, Kansas. I grew up in Wichita, Kansas. I went to Wichita University for two years and the University of Nebraska for another two and a half years. Received a BFA degree there. I went to Brooklyn Museum Art School on a scholarship for 6 months. And then --

Audience: [Inaudible 00:26:29] Mary Jane.

Bruce Conner: Pardon?

Audience: Don't forget about Mary Jane.

Bruce Conner: Oh, Mary Jane. She was from Wichita, she lived in New York. There are a lot of people from Wichita. There's a whole gang of us. Mike McClure went to high school with me. We have sort of a club. Let's see, what happened – Oh, then I went to the University of Colorado graduate department for one year and got such terrible grades that I couldn't possibly get a master's degree. I left the school, got married to Jean and moved to San Francisco in 1957. I lived there up to about 1961, when I went to Mexico. I lived in the Haight-Ashbury.

I did everything that everybody did in 1967 in the Haight-Ashbury in 1958, '59 and '60. I painted my windows. I painted my shoes. I would take peyote and walk out in the streets and realize that there was absolutely nobody in the whole Bay Area that was taking such a strange substance to alter their consciousness, except maybe there might be an Indian somewhere over in Alameda. I was doing a lot of assemblages and collages. I had done *A Movie*. I was really very involved in sculptures and assemblages and all sorts [00:28:00] of things, many, many different dimensions of works.

There are people who don't see me as a filmmaker, but as a sculptor, although I've only done about 13 sculptures. Others think of me as a collage maker, a drawer, drawing whatever. I finally decided, since I was in the *Art of Assembly* show at the Museum of Modern Art, and I had sold enough things that I figured I was going to make a living off of the art. I made \$7,000 in one year selling my work. People told me how cheap and inexpensive it was to go to Mexico. So I went to Mexico.

Before I went to Mexico, I shot a lot of the footage that was in *Looking for Mushrooms* in the streets of San Francisco – a large part of the work that's multiple exposed. It was shot about the same time I was shooting *Cosmic Ray*. It was single framed a lot of the time, multiple exposed. It was multiple exposed inside the camera. In front of my house there is a one-way street. Oak Street, on the panhandle of Golden Gate Park. There used to be a firehouse on the next block, so there were signs painted on the street that said, SLOW FIRE HOUSE AHEAD. The firehouse had been out of business for a couple or three years and the cars had worn off part of the letters.

The SLOW sign, the S had disappeared entirely and half of the W was gone. So for the year before that I kept looking out the window and it said, LOV. Two days before I went to Mexico, I cut out a big cardboard stencil the exact same size as the regulation stencil letters [00:30:00] of the street. I put an E at the end of it, in the same style, and went out at midnight and spray painted it with white paint. It said, LOVE out on the street. The next morning, all of the

commuters came into town driving over that street. I went out and I took a photograph of it on my car. I took it from my window.

Then I was packing up stuff in my studio. About 1:30 in the afternoon, I looked out there and it wasn't there anymore. I went down to the street and the guardians of the streets of San Francisco had come and painted it black. But they didn't just paint a big square black, they painted each letter black, so that it still said LOVE, but it was black. They filled in the O of LOVE. Just before I left for Mexico in my station wagon, I cut a stencil in the form of a heart and I put the heart in the middle of the O and spray painted it white. Then I put it on the hood of my car and spray painted it white. Then I got in the car and drove off to Mexico and didn't come back for a year.

When I went to Mexico, what I found out was that you have to keep coming back to the border all the time to renew your papers and to get your car registered and everything. It really ended up costing more to go to Mexico than it did in the United States. After I had moved there, nobody had bought my artwork. So the whole myth of living as an artist, an expatriate in Mexico, disappeared very quickly. I left Mexico penniless, and had to live with my parents. My son was born there, in Mexico.

When I was there, Timothy Leary rang my doorbell. I had met him in New York. [00:32:00] He said he was in Mexico City and he was going to go around and look at the places where the magic mushrooms grew. He had a map of where they had grown that he had gotten from some department. We started going to those places. All that Mexican footage that was in it, we were in San Pedro Tenancingo looking for mushrooms, not really looking for them to take them. Ostensibly, he said he wanted to talk to them.

Like most things that Timothy does, he manages to destroy whatever he says he's doing before it ever really happens. He'd talk to the people and he'd be sociable and would talk about the mushrooms. Somebody would say, "Yes, I've taken the mushrooms," and then he'd say, "What happened?" This gringo, uptight guy pushing them about this thing which is so much a part of their lives and has been for centuries, part of their religion and social life. Of course, they would clam up immediately. Most everything else that Timothy did after that generally worked out to be the opposite of what he said he was doing. He started an organization to popularize and legalize LSD, but he accelerated the making it illegal by probably three or four times as quickly. I don't know if that tells too much about *Looking for Mushrooms*.

In *A Movie*, which is the first movie I made -- Yeah?

Audience: I was wondering, you seem to emphasize as far as If we can refer back to [inaudible 00:33:45] Kennedy, one major theme is in the movie. I seem to see several themes. [Crosstalk 00:33:54].

Bruce Conner: Several themes?

Audience: Yeah.

Bruce Conner: Yeah.

Audience: Several themes in the movie.

Bruce Conner: [00:34:00] I don't really want to talk about those themes. I mean, they're there and they work if they work as a film. For me to speak about them specifically might lend more importance to one thing or another. In a way, I really want it to do it's talking itself. If it's successful, it does that. Who is the Illinois poet? What's his name? He was giving a lecture once and somebody asked him to explain the poem he had written. He said, "You want me to use worser words to tell you what it means?" I don't know, the themes that are there might be necessary to talk to somebody about.

Because I showed the film, all my films to some students at San Francisco State in the film department. Afterwards, one of the students said that of all of the films that I showed, that was the most meaningless. It had absolutely no meaning at all. It had no relationship to the death of Kennedy and it was a hodgepodge of images that didn't mean anything. So I started explaining to him exactly what every aspect of it related to, the symbolism of the ritual objects, carrying the rifle and the cross of the signal corps and all these things.

Then I realized afterwards that he was about 19 years old. When these events took place, he would have been nine years old. It could have just gone right by him. He never really paid any attention to ... all that stuff that happened. It was the first time I've had to relate to [00:36:00] it in a totally different way, in that I feel like the people who lived through it, it hits them pretty strongly. But there are so many things that it refers to, that a person ... Like, for somebody who never lived through it, was never born at that time, to know a lot of what it was, they would have to practically start becoming a scholar on the area to find out really what happened.

Audience: Why didn't you use the footage of his actual death?

Bruce Conner: Why didn't I? Because I couldn't get it. *Life* magazine bought it for a million dollars from Zapruder. Then the FBI insisted they had to have it. I understand that when it came back there were a couple of frames missing. Those pictures weren't printed for, I think, a couple of years afterwards, too. Nobody got to see them for a long period of time. There's a lot that nobody got to see. That's what the movie is about, too. *Cosmic Ray* is about censorship in one level, the anti-war film. Yeah?

Audience: [Inaudible 00:37:19] all the way into the hospital?

Bruce Conner:I doubt it. It was tightly closed up. I don't think they would have let anybody in there except somebody who maybe had still cameras and was related to the family or something. In *A Movie* -- Yeah?

Audience: Is *Breakaway* [inaudible 00:37:43]?

Bruce Conner:Reversed. Reversed in time. It's the same sounds and the same pictures.

Audience: [Inaudible 00:37:52]?

Bruce Conner:Yeah, you can print them. It's a mechanical [00:38:00] process, optical printing where you can print it in reverse.

Audience: Do you have access, did you pay for it?

Bruce Conner:Did I pay for it?

Audience: [Inaudible 00:38:10].

Bruce Conner:I took it to the place that does that, and they did it. It was a little difficult, trying to sync up the sound backwards because I synced it up the wrong way a couple of times. I couldn't figure out why it wasn't working. I have some film that is unfinished in some respects.

Audience: Why, in all your films [inaudible 00:38:35]. Why did you do that?

Bruce Conner:Why did I do that? The first film that I used that in was *A Movie*. Probably the impetus to do that was that, when I was about 15, 16 years old, I was at a friend's house. We were looking for something in his room, which he shared with his brother. He was looking through the drawers of his brother's dresser. In the bottom drawer he found this strip of film, which is that lady taking her stocking off. He said, "Look, here's this naked lady picture that he has in his drawer." I said, "Yeah." He said, "Do you want it?" I said, "Yeah." He gave it to me, so I kept it.

I was running films societies, or working with film societies, and after I'd gone to the University of Colorado and started a film group there called Experimental Cinema Group, which is still going on. I went to San Francisco and Larry Jordan and I ran a film group. And I always thought it would be really ... numbered leader that comes through is something you're not supposed to see. But it always happens when people are showing movies, like projectionists don't run things right or they just start and you get all this stuff going through which nobody really wants to look at so much. They want to see the picture start.

I thought it would be neat, [00:40:00] on the leader of one of the films we were showing, to splice this in, in between the numbers. I can go 10, 9, 8, 7

,6, 5, 4, 3, and there would be the movie. I told Larry about that and he was horrified at the idea. So part of the reason I started doing the movie was I figured that the only way I'd do it would be make my own movie and have my own leader and have that little scene happen, which is sort of ... well not just talking about the leader there, then we're getting into the symbolism of that lady. It's like something that you're aren't supposed to see.

Numbered leader is something you're not supposed to see. In *Cosmic Ray*, which WAS the next film that I used that into, I related to the leader as something that started on the screen, something that you aren't supposed to see. It's about censorship in one respect. You aren't supposed to see the leader, you aren't supposed to see naked ladies. In fact, at the time that film was made, I could have been locked up as a pornographer because, per se, any picture of a nude human being with pubic hair showing was pornography. There was no defense for it.

I purposefully used shots showing pubic hair, because there's a whole dialog there about what you're allowed to see and what censorship is in the relationship of sex to war and how man's passions and emotions are changed; how sex is utilized to change them; how censorship controls how you relate to sex, to relate to love; how people, in order to make war, are taken away from women. Like the United States Army, is the largest organized [00:42:00] homosexual group in the country. It's determined to isolate you from contact with women, to redirect your emotions and your passions and your energy towards the destruction of life rather than the creation of life.

Also, the numbered leader, besides that aspect of it, became a beat. A beat which turned into ...

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