CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF **ART**

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Independent Filmmaker, Bruce Conner, Lecture

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Bill Judson: Good evening. It's my very great pleasure this evening to welcome once again to Pittsburgh Bruce Conner. Bruce has been here once before, a few years ago with some of his earlier films and he's come again this evening with two of his most recent films and three of the earlier films as well. Bruce will introduce the program in just a moment. Just in a practical vein I want to say that the first four films are on one reel, and we will show those four films, and we're using just one of our projectors and so there will be a momentary break. We'll turn the house lights up slightly and thread up the last film, which is *Crossroads*, and view that, and then afterward, we can have at Bruce and vice versa.

Presumably, if you've ever seen a so-called independent or experimental film, you've seen Bruce Conner's *A Movie*. I'm absolutely confident that there's no need for me to make any introduction to Bruce Conner as a filmmaker [00:02:00] or as a person. I would just like to say that it means a tremendous amount to me. His work is one of the first I've ever I've seen. I've always been absolutely fascinated by the process of found footage in its many aspects. I think that the tension that his films, that he is constantly creating, what that material was before he found it, what somebody else made it to be, and what he does with it, that tension between those two states of being is consistently extraordinary in every one of his films.

That's only one of the reasons I love his films so much, but it's what I'd like to emphasize I guess. In any case, Bruce, welcome. I'll hand the program over to you.

Bruce Conner: Yeah, the music that we were listening to when we came in here is the music Terry Riley composed for *Crossroads*. There were two musicians that worked on that film. That's the bomb film you saw on all the posters. The music that he performed was performed on an electric Yamaha organ recorded on a 16-track machine. It was the first time I really had sort of reversed the process of making films that I usually do and had somebody do music to my film. I got involved in more or less trying to orchestrate or predict or deal with the musicians to do the music that I wanted and have match the images.

The films I'm going to show this evening, the first film is called *Permian Strata*. It's a nondescriptive title but maybe it is. It's about four minutes long. It was made in 1969 and the little [00:04:00] Bobby Zimmerman did the sound track for it. The next film is called ... Oh, another thing is that there may or may not be titles on the films. *Permian Strata* doesn't have a title on it. Sometimes they may not say it's the end. After *Permian Strata*, there is the film called *Report* which is concerning the assassination of President Kennedy, November 22, 1963. It deals with the radio broadcast of that day that he arrived in Dallas, Texas.

The third film is *The White Rose* and it's different than the other ones, in that I shot all of the film that was used in that picture. In general, the film is going to one of two kind of points of view, one of which is very personal films dealing with people or places or events that have a great meaning to me: people that I know, this painting by Jay De Feo, which originally was called *The Death Rose*. By the time I had finished the film, she had called it *The White Rose*. That painting, she started painting it in 1957 and in about 1959, she decided it was too small so we went and cut it off the canvas and glued it onto a larger canvas that perfectly fit the bay window of her flat in San Francisco.

At that time, that group of 15 people that helped transfer the canvas, we realized that there was no way for her to remove it from that flat without cutting out the wall or a window. Because the way in which she dealt [00:06:00] with the paint was build it up very, very thick. By the time she was evicted from that flat in 1965, the paint, the outer edges of the canvas, was about eight or nine inches thick and the painting itself weighed 2,300 pounds. It was like an extension of her consciousness. It existed as long as she was painting it and in the process of doing that, she never started another painting.

Whereas in 1958 or so when she was in a show at the Museum of Modern Art, which I think was called “11 Young New Painters ... New Artists,” and she was a very important new artist on the scene, she disappeared into this obsession and total involvement with this painting. She didn't start another painting, she became totally obsessed with that to the point where there was virtually no identity outside of herself or any other kind of reality. Basically she was being evicted along with her husband, Wally, because she was playing some rather extravagant games and became so involved in word games that people couldn't understand what she was saying.

In any case, I arrived there 15 minutes before Bekins arrived to start to take the painting down, crate it, and take it out the window and send it to the Pasadena Museum, where Walter Hobbs, being the director there, had offered to pay for the removal of the painting so that Jay could go to Pasadena and finish it. It was never really finished. In any case, the film represents that one day, that event. That was completed in 1967, *Report* was completed in ’67, four years after I started it. [00:08:00] The last two films are the latest films I made in this last year. *Take the 5:10 to Dreamland* is, like all the other films except *The White Rose*, made out of bits and parts of other films, which might be feature films, documentaries, educational films or whatever.

It represents to me a sort of feeling of a dream of images that sort of appear and disappear and they have a certain kind of strength or meaning to them which you can't quite grasp. Since it's one of my newer films, I sometimes find it kind of difficult for myself to put a rational structure on it and say what it is, but I think what it is, is that I'm trying to reach the a way of dealing with dream

images. The process by which it was achieved is that Patrick Gleeson, who was the other composer that worked on *Crossroads*, is a genius at the E-mu synthesizer, Moog synthesizer, synthesized sound. He is the first musician to introduce synthesized music with jazz, went on tour with Herbie Hancock for a year and a half, improvising on synthesizer, and also had the honor of being the only un-black black man, the only white man to play with Herbie Hancock.

While he was doing this track for the beginning of *Crossroads*, which deals of course with the underwater atomic bomb test with at Bikini in 1946, he made this composition which used some of the elements that we'd developed for the soundtrack plus his then-current interest in 12-tone music composition. In [00:10:00] the *Crossroads* film, the first 12 minutes establishes the time and place and the event with natural sounds of where the atomic bomb was set off. It was the fifth time the atomic bomb had ever been set off. The first time in New Mexico, the second time and third time it was dropped on Japan.

Then there was a joint effort on the part of ... I don't know if it was then called the Atomic Energy Commission, but that group that represented that government function, plus the Army and the Navy. They sent 90 American and Japanese warships out in the middle of the harbor and suspended an atomic bomb under one of them, 50 feet below, and set it off. At the time, it wasn't any possibility making a sound recording of that event because all that really was recorded was the fact that there was an enormous overload on the sound equipment. I don't think that for probably five or six years was it possible to get a recording of a bomb and that event in itself was unique because I have never heard of another underwater bomb test like it. It's the atomic bomb, it's not the hydrogen bomb. It's only 1/1,000 as powerful as the hydrogen bomb.

When Patrick was working on that track, we had an opening scene and so he fabricated the world surrounding that first event, which is a view of the lagoon from one of the islands. The first thing he did was he laid down a track of the sound of insects in the air and the sound of the wind blowing through the leaves of the palm trees, the sound of the waves breaking on the beach, the sounds [00:12:00] of three different kinds of birds and then the sounds of all the many, many airplanes that were flying up in the sky. He had 500 cameras recording the event and pictures were being taken from towers on the islands and from cameras on boats.

Sometimes there were drone boats travelling across the water into that area. There are also drone airplanes flying through the cloud, over the cloud, around the cloud, B-29s, pontoon airplanes. The sound track is just filled with all the sound of airplanes as well and then he reinvented the sound of the bomb. *Take the 5:10 to Dreamland*, as we were in the process of completing *Crossroads*, he took all of those elements and decided to make a piece of music for me. He used birds, some insect sounds, and then the music that he created, and then later the sort of a drone that appears, it’s like the sound of

the airplanes and at the end of the film, there is the sound of thunder, which is comparable to the atomic bomb structure in the sound track.

When he played the music for me and I was listening to it, a lot of images started dropping down into my mind, visually, as I was listening to the music. They were images out of all this footage that I've been collecting for 15 or 20 years and have never put into any films and they just started appearing. Like one little shot of an image of a rocket going up in the sky or a rock falling down and there wasn't any [00:14:00] ... It was like a dream. As it went by, I just became aware that Patrick had made a new sound track and I was involved in making a new movie right that minute. As soon as it was finished, I told Patrick about that experience, these dream-related images. We timed it to find out how long it was; it was five minutes, ten seconds long and Patrick said "Take the 5:10 to Dreamland."

Then I went home and edited the film and brought out a lot of those images that I had remembered, that I had seen, and edited it into that film. The first four films before we take a break to change the reels are: *Permian Strata* (1969), *Report* (1963-1967), *The White Rose* (1965-1967, when I was making that film), and *Take the 5:10 to Dreamland* and then after the program, I'll answer some questions and talk to you then. Thank you.

Audience: Hi, this is more of an observation than a question, but you might have something to say, but until *Take the 5:10 to Dreamland*, it never occurred to me that your films were in black and white and then suddenly it's color ... That's all.

Bruce Conner: Well there was another film that was in color called *Looking for Mushrooms*.

Audience: Oh yes.

Bruce Conner: All the other ones were black and white, except sometimes people would tell me they liked my use of color in *Cosmic Ray*, [00:16:00] which is a black and white film, except it has a stroboscopic kind of effect ... I don't know, perhaps you might have noticed it in *Report*. The flashing light creates some colors and patterns which are actually patterns created within your own mind, your nervous system, because of the light interference patterns, flashing lights. The other composer/musician that I didn't mention was ... *The White Rose* was performed by Miles Davis on a record that's called *Sketches of Spain*, which is still available on Columbia Records. I think that one segment of the record was music that had been written by Rodrigo.

Bill Judson: I am curious about how much footage you worked with for *Crossroads*, how much total footage you had available, and what if any manipulation, I suppose, in terms of both tempo and framing, optical printing that you did with that, if any?

Bruce Conner: Well, the source material that I was able to get my hands on was approximately six hours of film at the National Archives in Washington. I went there and sat in front of a Steenbeck and looked at all of the material on 35mm and selected about two and a half or three hours, I believe, of footage to be printed and then sent to me in San Francisco. Out of that, I ended up with 36-minute film. Initially, I was planning a 15-minute film and I was planning [00:18:00] to have much shorter cuts to deal with the progression of the bomb blast as the stages that it went through and examining each stage of it and dealing with the musical background.

I tried to work with some of the footage by optically printing some images, like two frames for each one to make them longer, and some other footage I printed excluding every other frame so it went faster. Even though the scenes that I was working on which actually dealt with the Saratoga sinking and debris on the beaches, I never really used in the finished film. I think there was maybe one other ... Oh, there was one sequence in that that I tried and it never really worked. Basically, I felt I had to work with what footage I had there and the more I worked on it, the more I realized that it had to keep that amount of time that it had.

Most of the images that you might see of the atomic bomb, have been quick shots of the blast going off and that's it. You get about five seconds, ten seconds, 15 seconds of film. But of course when they were shooting the footage, they were really trying to see what in the world was going on with that event. They started the cameras before the blast went off and they would run for possibly ten, 11 minutes of film footage. A lot of the footage is in slow motion and I'm not quite sure because it is almost impossible to gauge any kind of scale, because how do you compare that with other kind of phenomena of which of the footage really [00:20:00] deal with actual time? Possibly the next to last shot might be, which is a fairly close up shot, and another earlier very close up shot. Possibly that long, very, very longest aerial shot where the bomb explodes and it's just this little tiny thing out there. It seems like it takes longer but then of course, it looks like it may be 20 miles away from where the camera is. Somebody else has to have some questions.

Audience: I'm under the impression that you, amongst other filmmakers, started the Canyon Cinematheque in San Francisco, is that correct? And if it is, I'd like to know something about that, because recently I saw some films that you and Gunvor Nelson made at the San Francisco Museum from the middle '60s. I was wondering if ... I know that she recently released a full-length feature film about her family and it seems like from the original films that she made in the middle '60s and the way her films are going now, it's a strange development compared to this film that you made last year. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Bruce Conner: Well, there's two things you're speaking of: one is about Canyon Cinema Coop, Canyon Cinematheque. Canyon Cinema was started by Bruce Bailie and Chick Strand and a couple of other people. They were showing movies in Canyon, California about 1962, maybe '63, they started doing that. Then somehow it [00:22:00] got over into San Francisco, there started to be a sort of cooperative patterned after the New York Filmmakers Cooperative, it's called Canyon Cinema Cooperative. It was organized in San Francisco and I wasn't particularly involved at the inception of it. I knew other people that were there and after they'd gone through some of the basic structures of getting it organized about six months later, I got involved.

First of all, is I was very skeptical that it would be of much use or that would function. I was still kind of skeptical when I finally got into it but I decided that it wasn't really worthwhile for me to be there in San Francisco and not be a part of that. As the years went by, I became a member of the board of directors off and on for a total of maybe three or four years. I've been involved in it a lot, except in recent times I haven't. There are a lot of people that … Well I think the program you saw in San Francisco represented that basic group of people that might have been involved in Canyon Cinema. I can't really speak too well as to what Gunvor's films are or for their development. I haven't seen all of her films and I haven't seen the latest long film about her family.

This year, I didn't … at least, this fall I've been teaching in the San Francisco State Film Department as a visiting filmmaker, teaching graduate film seminar and undergraduate film seminar and a production class with 15 students, each of whom are making their own film production, which puts me at their service any time of the day during the week and [00:24:00] the interference of the times of scheduling has made it so I never … I haven't even able to get out in the evenings to see the films at Canyon Cinemathque, because I have classes that run until 7:30 at night.

So I can't really speak to Gunvor's films. I know that in 1957 or '58 when I first moved to San Francisco from Kansas, having gone to the University of Colorado and then had a scholarship at Brooklyn Museum Art School, I entered a collage that I made in 1954 in one of the national competitions that was going on at the San Francisco Art Museum. I was given first prize for my collage and Gunvor Nelson got a prize for her painting, which was a rather classic, almost German expressionist-type painting.

A lot of the people I think that were involved in Canyon Cinema and in making films at that time were artists, visual artists who happened to find their direction going into film like Bob Nelson and myself, Gunvor. I don't think that Bruce Bailie could be considered in that group but a lot of the people who got involved in film were people who had other persuasions or work that they were doing and it just happened to be that whatever they were doing found its

place in film, maybe for just one or two films, maybe for a whole long period of time.

Audience: Is your primary interest … Is your thing now just your teaching, but are you still making films? You got that National Endowment [00:26:00] money and I was just curious.

Bruce Conner: Well, I got a grant to make the *Crossroads* film. They gave me $10,000 and that was last year and I spent $14,000 of it so far. I got an NEA grant for painting and drawing and since I've been teaching I haven't been doing any work at all except trying to get organized: some film, and I have an unfinished painting, and I have a whole series of drawings that I'd like to work on. I think that probably it won't even happen until after this semester is over in January, then I can start working on it, so it's sort of standing in abeyance.

Audience: This question may seem sort of vulgar there's a kind of seductive, anaesthetizing quality in *Crossroads*, where the formal qualities of the bomb explosion becomes very beautiful as it goes on in some sense, or at least, they become very seductive in some way. The film, in fact, in many ways is very beautiful, which seems obviously contradictory to what you're photographing. How do you deal with having made a bomb explosion so beautiful? Do you sense a contradiction there?

Bruce Conner: Well, there is obviously a paradox and there's contradictions and there's many different things that can exist simultaneously. The fact that the bomb footage is beautiful is one of the fascinations that I had for the footage when I saw it in 1946 or '47, when the bomb was first put on. It's a grand theatrical event; it was set up for the cameras, to be spread out in all the theaters of the world. The theatricality of it is one part that interests me and then also the fact that, well, it is a frightening event. It's something you have to confront [00:28:00] and I've tried to confront it for a long period of time and it keeps reappearing in my films: in *A Movie*, in *Cosmic Ray*, *Looking for Mushrooms*, and *Report*.

Perhaps my involvement in making a film is a process of trying to exorcise that difficult comprehension of what the bomb is. At the present time, it seems to me that the bomb has really been made to disappear. It only appears as a sort of an emblem, like you see a skull-and-crossbones on a bottle or something like that. It just becomes sort of an immediate reaction symbol, that symbolizes more or less a political or conceptual point of view that doesn't take into consideration what the phenomenon is itself, which is an enormous release of energy. And it takes a certain form which coincides with many different kinds of concepts of energy, how something starts and grows and decays.

I think for something that might have and has had, will have such a great influence on our lives, to not look at it, not sit and see where it's beautiful or

where it's ugly or just to even begin to examine what it is without politicizing it, I think is unfortunate. The next time you see it may not be on the screen.

Audience: I think maybe I didn't put the question right: by detaching it from that context that you describe, that political context, [00:30:00] don't you somehow neutralize it, or at least neutralize the threat in some way, or isn't there the danger of overdoing that?

Bruce Conner: Well I don't think there's any danger of overdoing it, I haven't seen any movie like this before. I don't think the way in which people relate to the bomb has been so overly balanced in the other direction. I don't think we're in danger of rushing out wanting people to set off some more bombs just because it looks beautiful in the film. The danger is in that sense, I don't think it's apparent. Maybe the danger is that you have to confront something that you think ought to be ugly because of its threat, there's enormous number of things that are threatening and dangerous that are beautiful.

Audience: I was going along with the awesomeness of the thing, so the morbid beauty as was said back here, and then we got this kind of black stage so black clouds and that long sequence of almost gray, what were you trying to do there? I was lost in that, I can't quite see what you were trying to achieve with it.

Bruce Conner: Well the bomb was viewed from a lot of different positions, almost every one of them viewed it in a way that almost is like an entirely different event taking place. Basically I wanted to get in to looking at the event as something that took place over a period of like seven or eight, ten minutes rather than if you might see a documentary or a film of a sports event, the Olympics, and you see a competitive race between ten runners and you see them from 50 different views while they're going through that race that takes ten seconds. [00:32:00]

Well you have a chance to see a great overview of that whole period of time. Now if you're dealing with a phenomenon that takes its shape and spells itself over a long period of time, then you're dealing with a situation where perhaps your reaction is, "This is uninteresting, this is dull, nothing is happening here." However what's happening there is probably more important and more dangerous than the blast itself, because outside of the shockwave there was no real fire ball. The real danger was the mist and the clouds which carries radioactivity that spreads out over a long, wide area, you don't know it's there, you never feel it.

Radioactive poisoning is painless, you're not aware of it, it just attacks the structure of the atoms in your body and destroys the defenses of the body; they disappear. Of course, going through that process makes the body susceptible to all the diseases and corruptions that you might have had. I've spent so much time looking at that footage that I'm fascinated with what I see

happening within that footage, within those images. The more I look at it the more I see what's happening.

One of my purposes in presenting it in the film is trying to develop a series of ways of looking at the event where perhaps the kind of structure that people have when they look at films and movies, of having a narrative [00:34:00] construction, continually breaking up into short segments, to start becoming involved in seeing what is going on, on a slower time scale. I think that perhaps the kind of mind that could relate to that may be, in a parallel way, might be somebody who goes fishing but doesn't really care if they catch fish and they sit by the water with the line in the water and they watch the reflections on the water, they hear the birds and the clouds and everything that's there they just feel that experience of … I feel that's an important kind of experience.

One of the difficulties in dealing with theatrical art, which the film is, is: how do you present it in a way that it makes its impression? Perhaps using the leverage of such a dramatic event as the atomic bomb to present clouds and look at clouds and see the forms that they go through is an excuse for doing that. But more than that, I think the last shot of the film represents a lot of things to me and one of them is that although it appears there's nothing going on, there's an enormous amount of things going on if you start to look into the detail, like you look at the ocean down there which was enormously foreshortened and starts breaking up into little patterns which have virtually no relationship to a firsthand experience with water, and the sky itself then becomes [00:36:00] so very much involved in the process of what film is, which, that's an extension of the molecular process as well, and the sky itself is just surging with all kinds of miniscule dots, which could be perhaps identified in a romanticized way as being the dance to the atoms or whatever.

I find it difficult really to try to break it down into specifically concise explanations of what's going on because, for me, most of my films I find difficult to talk about because the process never really starts and ends. It started 30 years ago when I saw that footage and I'd always been thinking about, "Sooner or later somebody's going to make a movie of what that event was and we'll really look at it finally after all these years." Nobody did it, so I did it. I like going to movies, I like all kinds of films and my taste in films is greatly varied, except that sometimes when I want to see something that's not there I have to make the film myself.

Audience: This film, however, seems pretty obvious that it's very different from your other films; in fact, in many ways it's very different than any other film I've ever seen, except for training films, or films that deal with footage in a very different way, in a way an artist usually deals with it. Your earlier films are very highly manipulative of the found footage that you use and it's very clear that

there is a strong personality behind these earlier films manipulating the footage and doing various things with it.

In this film, you seem to have consciously tried, maybe as a result of this evolution [00:38:00] that you're talking about, but at a certain point you consciously made a decision to sort of do the opposite, to sort of eliminate yourself as an obvious manipulator of the material. I'm just wondering how you feel about that, do you agree with what I'm saying or do you feel that I've missed the point in some way?

Bruce Conner: I think that if you're going to be aware of any kind of consciousness of what causitive force or what you yourself personally are doing, you can become involved in actions where you can say, "I am doing something and I'm doing a lot of it, I can say that I'm doing a lot of things." Then you look at that experience as some kind of limitations and see what kind of effect and what you really did do whether it was an expression of other forces, whether you were playing roles that were predetermined by people in society or the way in which, if you're an artist, you're using the mechanics that've been handed down from other artists.

Then you can compare that kind of experience where you might say, "I'm doing nothing at all," and I think that the point might be taken that the more you get involved into a process of trying to have no effect, the more you realize how much effect you have. My feeling on … Films to me or the work that I do in drawing, or photographs, paintings, sculptures and assemblages are extensions of me and they aren't at the same time. It's a performance, a game, a [00:40:00] dance, a means of acquiring information or dealing with the concepts of what an illusion is and what is reality.

I think this film, as I look at it as a whole, is just as much my film as *A Movie* is. It has very similar limitations that has many of the same kind of ideas, in fact it has the same image, I use that same image of the bomb in *A Movie*. In a way I can't really answer what you're speaking to. I don't really feel I'm ready to deal with it but I could use it as an extemporaneous sort of comment.

Audience: I thought that what you did with the color white in *Dreamland* was very interesting. It sort of picked up my interest and … [Inaudible].

Bruce Conner: Sometimes it's very difficult to control one's dreams. A lot of them go on tangents that you can't expect them to do at all and that's an observation that I found myself.

Audience: Could you give us some idea of how much material you had to work with when you started cutting *Crossroads*. Was the shooting ratio, or your cutting ratio, fifty-to-one, or five-to-one?

Bruce Conner: I had three and a half hours of film. I looked at [00:42:00] about five hours of film and it's 36 minutes, so whatever that mathematics turns out to be. One-to-seven or something from the footage I selected.

Audience: That grey sky in the last sequence of *Crossroads* you were referring to a few minutes ago. I was very aware of that because it was in symmetrical patterns, almost concentric patterns. Is there any reason for that?

Bruce Conner: There seems to be, like … I kept seeing circles of things billowing…

Audience: Was that the emulsion or was that in the atmosphere?

Bruce Conner: It's in the process of dealing with film and how it's processed and film structures, the grain of the film, when copies are made. There's just sort of interference patterns plus things that happen when you run the film through a bath, how either the emulsion is put on to the film or how it's developed. I try to exploit it, every bit of those things that might be a defect in some concept of film when you're actually faced with it, you have a choice of either using it or not, like the light fogging that happened on some of those shots.

Then I integrated them into the sequence of footage so that they could be dealt with, both in the way of the editing, but also what I wanted musicians to do. This of course was the first film I've ever made where the music was performed and created for the film after I'd done the editing, although I consulted with musicians. You had a question?

Audience: I was going to ask you about that piece of music, whether it was composed to go with that

Bruce Conner: [00:44:00] Yup.

Audience: It seemed to me to be very contained, sort of, and I was wondering … there were repeating figures that I felt weren't going to change at all, and I was wondering whether you asked him to make something that had a really firm ground in that baseline.

Bruce Conner: Terry Riley – I've known Terry since 1958 – started composing his own music in the 60's using repeating patterns based on Asian music, African music, Bach progressions, a lot of varieties of concepts which seem to come together into repeating forms, except there were continuous variations and there were also levels of patterns of rhythms through the music. He would work with that by using tape loops or delays on tapes where it would re-record sound on top of sound and he himself would then become a huge orchestra, either by playing soprano saxophone or electric organ or whatever.

He also wrote some music for other instruments which was called *In C*. It was released by Columbia Records and the only record that they released of his was called *Rainbow in Curved Air* and on the back side of that he performed "Poppy Nogood's All-Night Phantom Band." He used to do performances that would go on for six or seven hours and [00:46:00] a few years ago I got involved in producing a record for him for a French company because he gave up on Columbia Records when he felt they'd exploited and ruined his music on a third album that they put out. He's been locked out of recording any music and releasing it here in the United States since 1967.

This is the only music … Actually, it's not going to be on a record. I knew that if there was anybody that I was going to deal with to do the music for this and try to create sound – because I knew of no real music that I could just take – that could somehow depoliticize the bomb, that had basically a strong, positive base to the music and also dealt with a kind of the cyclic nature of things, that Terry was the one to do it, if I could make him sit there for 24 minutes and look at the bomb and make the music, because he's basically a benign, optimistic person.

Audience: I think that soundtrack is incredibly effective.

Bruce Conner: It's beautiful music, I mean it's also one way that I can listen to Terry's music all the time, just play my movies. I pick my favorite music for the movies. You got a question?

Audience: When were the pieces of music composed and recorded? At least, when were they recorded?

Bruce Conner: These here? On the last film? Terry's music was recorded … Let's see, I think it was something like the March or April of 1975. Patrick's music was completed by about [00:48:00] September, October. Patrick did the synthesized sound. The way musicians related to it was basically different. Patrick did the sound for each film strip, each shot, and we did it starting with the first, second, third and on to the end so that each development was an extension of the previous one. Each one was synchronized to that image so that we could take shots out or rearrange it if necessary.

Terry's relationship was discussing the film, showing it to him a lot of times, discussing some basis of indicating the blast. I wanted to have certain sounds happening, and I wrote a kind of a script where I described what was happening within each of the shots and what the music should be. Of course it was my orchestration where my orchestration of music is not very sophisticated and I can't do notation and I can't speak on musical terms. But I can speak in poetic terms or I can make parallels and Terry could understand that and his … Finally after working for about two days of trying to work out

themes in the studio for about 16 hours, it was resolved what he wanted to work as a base for that.

Then we started showing the film in direct sequence with a punch mark at the beginning and running it for 24 minutes. Every time we started it we would record another stereo track on the 16-track machine on the Yamaha organ. You had a question earlier, I bypassed you.

Bill Judson: It was in reference to a comment that was made. I noticed [00:50:00] watching Paul Sharits' *Axiomatic Granularity*, in which the grain emulsion, by focusing in on a small fragment of a frame and blowing that up, that actually it's a subject rather than … it's an active rather than passive perception. You can make those swirl any way you want, and for the longest time I thought it was a swirling pattern, and some day I said to myself, "Stop," and it stopped, and then I said "Go the other way," and it went the other way. Actually one controls all that themselves, because the grain is purely random. It's not in the film itself.

Bruce Conner: Well, you control your relationship to film in any case because you supply the space between those 24 flashes of light that happen every second. Your interpretation of that creates the concept of motion, it also creates the concept of relationship between three different images. One happens, the next one happens, the third one happens and you just automatically tie them together. It's quite possible to tie them together in ways that other people don't tie them together. You can tie them together in an entirely different way, that's what happens in *A Movie*, *5:10 to Dreamland* I think that happens.

Being aware of what the structure of film is to be aware of yourself and how you manipulate illusion and how illusion is manipulated to you. How much reality you were actually experiencing, how much you are projecting your movie onto reality, and how much somebody else is manipulating you to see reality or to think that you're seeing reality, when in effect you're just dealing with ghosts and illusions.

Audience: I have a question that really has three parts, but [00:52:00] it's all about one subject which is the source of your films. We've become very accustomed to looking at the Mars pictures and photographs that the astronauts take, that all the camera fields have these engraved lines for references, yet there are no such lines in this film. The first part is, did you come across footage like that or was all footage clean the way this material was?

Bruce Conner: I didn't see any footage with any reference marks like that and I think one thing that demonstrates what a crossroads it represents is that there is no reference points like that. Your reference points actually are the ships in the harbor, in the lagoon, because … it's the only footage I've ever seen where you can actually relate to it in a dimension that you can identify with, of walking on

to a boat. All of the other footage I've seen is just a bomb with no dimension, you have no sense of that. In the footage that's there there's all kinds of human frailty. Obviously the cameras on the boats were positioned, focused on the bomb … being at another ship, you had to move the camera over.

I think the photographs that are being dealt with on those interplanetary events, a lot of it has to deal with, I think, the process of reconstructing computerized television images back here on earth, that they are perhaps necessary to have in order to restructure that image, because mostly what happens is that the images aren't transmitted like *that*, like television. It used to take [00:54:00] something like several hours for the mechanism to transfer the information back and be retransformed into a television image.

I think basically the archeologists had their influence there. You're sort of dealing with unique events and such and what are you going to use for a reference point? At least if you've got a camera and you can take a picture from the same height and you see somebody's shoe down there, you can start relating that to the crosses that are on a photograph too.

Audience: The second part of the question, is where do you get your footage in general? And the third part, in *5:10 to Dreamland*, is it appears to be from a lot of institutional-type films, which you snipped two feet here, six inches there.

Bruce Conner: *Crossroads* all came from the National Archives. Footage from the other films comes from whatever I get my hands on and that's whether somebody sends me a film, like somebody sent that footage of the conversion of Paul, and I hadn't the slightest idea who made it because it didn't have any titles on it, no credits. It was sent to me about 1969, I looked at it and put it in a can and start … I thought about that Bob Dylan song and thought, "Oh boy, that's really dumb. You can't do that, that's really stupid." Then it sat there and it still sat in my head and it wouldn't go away, like eight or nine months later it was still … that relationship between that movie and the Bob Dylan thing was still in my head and I couldn't get it out.

I just figured, "Well, I have to make a movie out of this, there's no way. It'll just be sitting there [00:56:00] taunting me forever, making bad jokes and funny faces unless I make it into the movie. At this point I see it as being … I could look at it at a certain distance and relate it to things that were going on at that time, which was right after the Chicago convention. Also at the time the People's Park protest was happening in Berkley and I could identify with an artist who was working at Tom Luddy's theater on Telegraph Avenue. I was working at the Surf-Interplayers Theater in San Francisco and he was there at the theater cleaning the place up and all this stuff was happening down on the street, he went up on the roof to watch.

One of the cops turned a shotgun at him, blinded him. I think that's a pretty heavy relationship to what *Permian Strata* was about, but I think one of the reasons it didn't disappear from my mind at that time was the irrationality of the song, the symbolism of it, the stupidity of it, all the different levels that you can deal with it. There's still so many things going on there where all those differences and satirical things, I think are inherent in the music that Dylan wrote in the first place so it's that kind of extension. Question back there.

Audience: There were many times in watching *Report* when I was anticipating that you would edit the soundtrack or make loops out of the soundtrack, or manipulate that in ways parallel to the ways you were doing doing the visual, and it never happened. I was wondering did you ever consider doing that, and why you did you reject that possibility?

Bruce Conner: Well I made one film where I did that, but in general my attitude towards the [00:58:00] films I've made is to deal with my images playing off of the sound. I usually don't get involved personally myself into creating the sound in that I feel that my balance of relationship would be ruined, because once I get in to changing the sound, I think I've got too many variables for me to play with, that there would be so many directions it could possibly go that my advantage would be to limit the possibilities. Most of the time my relationship to what the subject is has a lot to do with what the music is or the sound is. That's an extension beyond myself which perhaps those images that I've taken out of the films are.

It's like taking what's out there and sending it back again. I think that I might do that if I would be working on a longer film, possibly a narrative or semi narrative film. Most of my films have been very short and one of the other limitations is that economically I haven't had the equipment to play around with that. In fact, most of my choices and why I make films the way I do is really by the fact that it's cheaper to make them that way.

Audience: On a technical note, when you take, say, your *5:10 to* Dreamland, you have a whole bunch of snippets which purely come "bang" to an end and you fade one into the other and you bring one down and bring the next one up, do you in effect make yourself a fade and splice the two pieces together? [01:00:00] How do you fade two distinct pieces of film that didn't have a fade in them to begin with?

Bruce Conner: There's a process called A- and B-rolling where you have two separate rolls of film and since they go through a racket gear situation, you can run them the same length, 200 feet, put another dot and they both have the dots appear at the same time. So you can take the A-roll and the B-roll, put a picture over here, say it goes ten feet in, you start the other picture on the other roll, say a foot sooner, then when it's printed the light in the printer starts with no light and then it fades up on one and on the other one it fades down. The effect,

when it's printed on the film, is that they both sort of merge and dissolve into each other.

In making fade-outs and fade-ins it's much simpler, you don't need A- or B-roll, you just tell the timer to time it so that it fades in or it fades out and that's the way that mechanism works. You had a question there.

Audience: How was the stroboscopic effect created in *Report*?

Bruce Conner: I took the camera and I took the lens off, I had a light bulb shining into it and I put my… either closed the shutter and snap it for a single frame or I would put my hand in front of the lens and snap it for a single frame and then expose it to the light and that's the way I did it mechanically with a camera and sometimes the flicker is different, like it would be black for two frames and so on.

Audience: Was any of the bomb footage that you viewed in color? [01:02:00]

Bruce Conner: No, I didn't see any color. I've heard that the Navy had color footage and all the seven or eight days I was in Washington, the Navy said they had no declassified footage, they didn't have anything available. Yes, they had some color footage but I couldn't have access to it. The last day I was there, I found out there was a color film that the Navy had released that did use that footage therefore it had to be declassified and I wasn't able to really get my hands on it to see what quality it was. What I have seen in the past from footage shot at that time, the quality of the color film they were using didn't have the subtleties to gather in all those variations of tonality that you can see in black and white.

In other words it's more grainy, it's less detailed and less subtle than the black and white, and then of course after 30 years color film changes color. Most of what I've seen has just been very pale, grainy, color film footage that might actually look better if I were to print the black and white film blue and rather than it being black and white it would just be blue. Basically there is very little color to deal with, you're looking at the ocean and you're looking at the sky and the clouds reflecting the sunlight and those blue colors.

Audience: I wonder if there was a color separation, like an old three-strip Technicolor?

Bruce Conner: No, I'm sure they didn't do that. They've had enough problems just running that film through their cameras, as you could probably see.

Audience: Did you ever consider hand tinting any of the black and white bomb footage that you used [01:04:00]?

Bruce Conner: No, I never did. Would you think about it?

Audience: Yeah, I was thinking about it a lot while I was watching it.

Bruce Conner: Paint little butterflies in it and eyes and mustaches and noses?

Audience: No.

Bruce Conner: Big mouth that grins, sticks out its tongue, and makes faces? There seem to be enough faces and things that just come out of the clouds, you start seeing all sorts of things that start to become profiles, or things like there's some kind of creature reaching out, or there's a big conical thing moving through the middle of it. There was one shot that I was very enamored of, or I could hardly get rid of, but finally I cut it out of the film because it was so clear … Well, it wasn't really an exceptionally good rendering of what the scene was, it was out of focus and grainy, shaky and I really couldn't see incorporating it into the editing, but it was something where this one cloud came out and it looked like a buffalo, exactly like a buffalo's head.

And I remember that when the bomb first was detonated and the newsreels came out, they pointed out that it looked like a buffalo's head and everybody sees it, they see a buffalo's head. Maybe in some respect I just didn't want to have the only agreed-upon image coming out of there was a buffalo head, I could see some theoreticians sitting around and drawing relationships between buffalos and my movies.

Audience: I guess I wasn't thinking of color in a cartoon sense, I was thinking of it just very arbitrary color areas almost to heighten the [01:06:00] illusion …

Bruce Conner: Abstract expressionism.

Audience: Or color-field painting … Something very handmade-looking on the surface of that footage …

Bruce Conner: It would sure turn into something else, because when you start drawing on top of film, the detail that you can actually control … it turns into these quavering, quivering lines.

Bill Judson: I think maybe the process that it might involve would be one of appropriation. One can hand-paint in such a way that one isn't aware even of the edges of the thing. One can hand-paint a light area where it's black on either side and then where it ends and where it begins isn't the issue – it's simply color. I think it would be more than depiction or representation, it would be a process of appropriating that image for oneself as opposed to letting it function more independently. Now you have to deal with it as it was shot by some cameraman from a plane or whatever. And its organization is the beginning and end of each shot, as it's placed in music, but this would be a different kind of appropriation unit.

Bruce Conner: I see the cameraman and each shot as being characters like you might have in a narrative film, the dancers, whatever. There are things that are idiosyncratic to perhaps the way in which it is seen and of course the identification with the shockwave which [01:08:00] hits the camera when it comes in there. The cameraman that was sitting in that pontoon airplane, that's how you found out the pontoon was on the airplane, the camera got hit and he got probably knocked out of his seat or something.

Bill Judson: Isn't there another shot where, as a shockwave hits, somebody on the ground and starts to rise and the plane is …

Bruce Conner: There's several things, but I'm not quite sure. I've got to study it some more. It looks like there might have been something more, but I think that part of it has to do with the apprehension of the pilots and the apprehension of the cameraman of what's going on there. Some of the shots were just total messes that I saw. The bomb went off and the cameraman was just so excited and involved in it – and looking at this, and looking at that – that he wasn't aware of the necessity of trying to watch something that's going on like that. One shot, with the aerial shot and then the camera follows that surge of mist as…

I think that's a phenomenal shot, that guy should have gotten an award for getting that shot. You had a question.

Audience: I was just going to, as a matter of fact, comment on the one shot where you can see – I didn't know whether it was a wave or a pontoon port. I was just going to ask you whether or not there was – I think you more or less answered my question – whether or not there was a lot of that sort of footage that you had cut out of the original.

Bruce Conner: Well, there were other shots like that, like there was one that was, I think it was shot from a drone airplane and it was an aerial shot and the shockwave hit and the whole [01:10:00] thing went sort of like this. You could see the wing going down and then it sort of righted itself but then it was sort of crooked. Then of course that other shot where you saw the top of the cloud and then you saw the base of the cloud, the shockwave hit the camera and the camera just went down like that and fades into a longer view. That shot was the end of that shot as far as I can tell. I don't know whether they gathered that footage and then spliced it on to other footage that they collected to put it into the reel.

Some reels were just from one camera, some of them were from several cameras. The pontoon airplane kept on going but he obviously had to stop shooting film for a few seconds after that because the next shot had the camera in a different position, but it was obviously the pontoon airplane because you could see the pontoon, or part of the wing. Last question.

Audience: The appearance of the ship and the end of *Crossroads* is very interesting to compare with the ship at the end of *A Movie*, in the fact that these two ships bracket your whole career in film. In *A Movie* it's very pessimistic, and yet the ship at the end of *Crossroads* almost kind of persists and survives in the face of this cataclysm that's just taken place. I find it to be a very hopeful image as opposed to the ship in *A Movie*, which is the end of civilization.

Bruce Conner: I think that when I made *A Movie*, I really expected the end of civilization was within the next three or four years. I went to Mexico to try to figure out how I could hide out in the mountains and live there when the bomb was dropped, and I think probably it was very close to that happening at that time back when I finally decided that [01:12:00] I wasn't going to stay in Mexico and wait for the bomb to drop. I'd come back and stay with my friends and hope it dropped on top of my house. I was coming back to the United States when the missile crisis and Cuba was getting more and more extravagant. It was as I was getting close to Texas and all the people I was hearing were Texas news commentators. I was sure that as soon as I cross the other side of the Rio Grande, the bomb would go.

Maybe the persistence of that boat is that somehow for 20 years I'm still here. I don't know if it's optimistic but the boat's been beat around a bit since then.

Bill Judson: Thanks Bruce Conner.

Bruce Conner: Yeah.

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