

2014

Cinema at the Crossroads: Bruce Conner's Atomic Sublime, 1958 - 2008

Johanna Gosse
Bryn Mawr College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/dissertations>

Custom Citation

Gosse, Johanna. "Cinema at the Crossroads: Bruce Conner's Atomic Sublime, 1958 - 2008." PhD diss., Bryn Mawr College, 2014.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/dissertations/97>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Cinema at the Crossroads:
Bruce Conner's Atomic Sublime, 1958-2008

by

Johanna Gosse

March 2014

Submitted to the Faculty of Bryn Mawr College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the films of Kansas-born, San Francisco-based artist Bruce Conner (1933-2008) over a period of fifty years, and contextualizes these works against the backdrop of Cold War American culture, politics, and history. It offers close readings of Conner's films and related activities, from his pioneering work with found footage, to the visionary works he shot with his own camera, as well as his involvement in psychedelic light shows and in the Bay Area counterculture. Throughout, I explore how Conner's films, situated at the historical "crossroads" of the Cold War, negotiated the cultural politics of race, nation, gender, and sexuality during this fraught period, with particular attention to their complex, and often ambivalent, engagement with popular culture.

The dissertation is loosely chronological, with each chapter focusing on a specific cross-section of Conner's filmmaking practice. It begins with Conner's first film, *A MOVIE* (1958), a densely packed montage of found footage fragments that is widely celebrated as an incisive critique of both Cold War ideology and the cinematic medium itself. *A MOVIE* is the first instance in which Conner used the iconic image that would reappear in his films over the following two decades: the atomic mushroom cloud. Footage of atomic explosions resurfaces in many later films, culminating with *CROSSROADS* (1976), an extended motion study comprised of archival footage of the Bikini Atoll underwater atomic tests. *CROSSROADS* supplies the title of this dissertation, as well as its central metaphor—"cinema at the crossroads"—and its primary hermeneutic, the "atomic sublime." Throughout, I argue that Conner's films visualize the tense oscillation between dystopian anxieties and utopian aspirations that epitomized the atomic age. These tensions, I propose, are encapsulated in the aesthetic category of the "atomic sublime," which describes the paradoxical experience of "terrible beauty," prompted by the visual

spectacle of an atomic explosion. By providing an in-depth examination of Conner's distinctive body of films, this study ultimately aims to expand the narrative of postwar American art to account for the pivotal roles played by both avant-garde cinema and West Coast artists in that history.

Table of Contents

Volume One

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	vi
List of Figures.....	ix
Introduction: BOMBHEAD.....	1
1. Fallout Films: Sex, Race, and the Bomb in A MOVIE (1958) and COSMIC RAY (1961).....	22
2. “No End of the Beginning”: LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959-1967), Light Shows, and Heterotopic Cinema.....	67
3. BREAKAWAY (1966): Pop Culture, Collaboration, Feminism.....	119
4. Sublime Time: Found Footage Motion Studies.....	163
Conclusion	213
Bibliography	220
Figures.....	231

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Though it might look and often feel like a lonely effort, writing a dissertation is an inherently collaborative process that requires the help and moral support of friends, family, colleagues, and mentors. I want to start by thanking my extended family in Lancaster, especially Lisa Stillwell, Doug Anthony, Sylvia Alajaji, Eric Baytala, Jerome Hodos, Veronika Ryjik, Emma Hamme, Christine and Wendy Jo Hess, Brian Frailey, and many, many others who make living there a delight. I extend extra love and gratitude to Sylvia, my confidante and comrade, who demonstrates every day how kindness, intelligence, and tenacity can harmoniously co-exist.

My community at Bryn Mawr has been an incredible source of support, both intellectual and material. Above all, I want to thank my adviser, Hoday King, who is a model of intellectual, pedagogical, and personal integrity. Over the course of many years, she has been a steadfast mentor and genuine friend, and I can't thank her enough for guiding me through this process. I also thank my committee, Lisa Saltzman, Steven Levine, and Sharon Ullman, for their thoughtful guidance and for inspiring me to do my best work. Thanks to my fellow Bryn Mawr students, especially Amy Haavik-Mackinnon, Marissa Vigneault, Benjamin Anderson, Lina Grant, Matt Feliz, Maeve Doyle, and Lori Felton, for fostering the kind of rich intellectual atmosphere and camaraderie that one hopes to find in graduate school. I owe a debt of gratitude to Deborah Barkun for introducing me to the department, and to Margaret Kelly, Pamela Cohen, Maria Dantis, and Teri Lobo for their administrative assistance and patience across many semesters and years. I am immensely grateful to Bryn Mawr's Graduate School of Arts & Sciences for enabling my research through a series of fellowships, assistantships, grants, and awards, and to The Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation for supporting the completion of this project with a Dissertation Fellowship.

Beyond Bryn Mawr, I have benefitted from the counsel and support of numerous people. David E. James has provided essential feedback and encouragement at key stages of research and writing, and I was honored when he agreed to serve on my committee. To say that this dissertation is indebted to his work would be an understatement. David Serlin has been a supporter and mentor since before I began graduate school, and I am grateful to call him my friend.

One of the great benefits of working on this project was the opportunity to meet people who knew and worked with Bruce Conner. I extend my heartfelt appreciation to Jean Conner, for her willingness to be interviewed and for her interest in my work; to the inimitable Toni Basil for meeting with me and for giving us *BREAKAWAY*, which sealed my fate as a film scholar; and to Ben Van Meter and Patrick Gleeson, for their thoughtful and frank correspondence. In particular, there are two people who worked closely with Conner who have become valued colleagues and dear friends. The first is Dean Smith, the principal archivist of The Bruce Conner Papers of the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. As Conner's former assistant, Dean's first-hand knowledge of Conner's life and work has been an invaluable asset in researching this project, and his friendship, an added bonus. The other person is Michelle Silva of the Conner Family Trust. Since we first spoke during an auspicious phone call in 2008, Michelle has become a source of insight, access, support, and kinship.

Michelle gave me a tremendous gift when she introduced me to Erica Levin. Our conversations have proven to be the most illuminating, rewarding, and challenging part of this process—I eagerly look forward to future dialogues and collaborations with her. Thanks also to my network of dear friends in the Bay Area who always made me feel at home, especially Abdul-Latif Islam, Sofía Córdova, and Katherine Gordy. In addition, I'd like to thank David

Kessler and Jack Von Euw of the Bancroft Library; Paule Anglim of Gallery Paule Anglim; Barbara Rominski, Head Library at San Francisco Museum of Art's Research Library and Archives; Steve Seid, Kathy Geritz, and Jason Sanders of the Pacific Film Archive; and Lynn Kimura at the Berkeley Art Museum, for their assistance with my research.

My family has been unwavering in their support throughout this long process. Each and every day, I am grateful to James Coupe for his love, intelligence, conviction, and for giving me crucial insights into an artist's perspective. I'm especially thankful for little Asa Coupe, already a budding cinephile, for giving me something to look forward to and a reason to get this thing done. My father, Van Gosse, has exerted a major influence on my thinking about history, politics, and especially, rock music; I thank him for exposing me to countercultural ideas and artifacts from a young age. Above all, my mother Eliza Jane Reilly played an indispensable role in bringing this project to fruition, by nurturing and challenging my thinking at every turn and reading every chapter meticulously. With the double-consciousness of an art historian and an Americanist, she helped me hone my arguments and contextualize them within a broader historical and cultural landscape. This project could not have been completed without her intellect, inspiration, and unconditional love, and I hope this makes her proud.

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my grandparents, Anthony C. Gosse, Dey Erben Gosse, Mary Jane Reilly, and Brendan Reilly.

LIST OF FIGURES

All images by Bruce Conner unless otherwise noted.

Introduction

I.1: BOMBHEAD (1989)

Chapter One

Figure 1.1: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still.

Figure 1.2: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still.

Figure 1.3: Promotional photograph taken at The Orpheum Theater, Wichita, Kansas (February 1952). Photographer Unknown

Figure 1.4: Photo of Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, and Bruce Conner (1965) Photographer: Larry Keenan

Figure 1.5: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still

Figure 1.6: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still

Figure 1.7: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still

Figure 1.8: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still

Figure 1.9: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still

Figure 1.10: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still

Figure 1.11: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still

Figure 1.12: “Gilda—Femme Fatale: Scientists, Engineers Christen Test A-Bomb,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (June 30, 1946)

Figure 1.13: “Miss Atomic Bomb” (1957). Model Lee Merlin pictured wearing mushroom cloud swimsuit. Photographer: Don English / Las Vegas News Bureau

Figure 1.14: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still

Figure 1.15: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still

Figure 1.16: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still

Figure 1.17: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still

Figure 1.18: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still

Figure 1.19: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still

Figure 1.20: *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, USA, 1964), film still

Figure 1.21: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still

Figure 1.22: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still

Figure 1.23: RAY CHARLES/SNAKESKIN (1961), assemblage

Chapter Two

Figure 2.1: UNA MAPA (August 26, 1962), drawing (detail)

Figure 2.2: MUSHROOM (September 2, 1962), drawing

Figure 2.3: MUSHROOM (September 2, 1962), drawing (detail)

Figure 2.4: MUSHROOM CLOUD (1963), drawing

Figure 2.5: Undated letter to Lee Streiff (c. late 1961)

Figure 2.6: Photograph of Isauro Nava, Yvonne Bond, Steve Leiper, Jean Conner, Beth Pewther, Alan Russo (August 1962). Photographer unknown

Figure 2.7: LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959-1967), 16mm, film strips

Figure 2.8: LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959-1967), 16mm, film stills

Figure 2.9: LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959-1967), 16mm, film strip

Figure 2.10: John Lennon, Letter to Bruce Conner (1969)

Figure 2.11: 23 KENWOOD AVE. (1963), drawing

Figure 2.12: Cover illustration for *San Francisco Oracle* (August 1967)

Figure 2.13: Crowd at the San Francisco Trips Festival (January 21, 1966)
Photographer: Gene Anthony

Figure 2.14: Cover illustration for San Francisco Trips Festival Program.
Credit: "Mandala by Bruce Conner, courtesy of owner, Michael McClure."

Figure 2.15: San Francisco Trips Festival Program (detail), list of participants for Sunday, January 23, 1966

Figure 2.16: Ben Van Meter, *S.F. Trips Festival, An Opening* (1966), 16mm, film still

Figure 2.17: Poster advertising KQED-TV's "Video Sutra II" (April 1967)

Figure 2.18 *The Trip* (Roger Corman, USA, 1966), film still

Figure 2.19: *The Cool Ones* (Gene Nelson, USA, 1967), film still

Figure 2.20: *The Cool Ones* (Gene Nelson, USA, 1967), film still

Figure 2.21: *The Cool Ones* (Gene Nelson, USA, 1967), film still

Figure 2.22: LUKE (1967/2005), 8mm/digital, video still

Chapter Three

Figure 3.1: BREAKAWAY (1966), 16mm, film still

Figure 3.2: BREAKAWAY (1966), 16mm, film still

Figure 3.3: Film poster, *The T.A.M.I. Show* (Steve Binder, USA, 1964)

Figure 3.3: BREAKAWAY (1966), 16mm, film still

Figure 3.4: Photo of Toni Basil, Bill Wyman, Mick Jagger, and Jack Nitzsche during *The T.A.M.I. Show* rehearsals (1964). Photographer: Steve Binder

Figure 3.5: PAS DE TROIS (1964/2005), digital, video still

Figure 3.6: BREAKAWAY (1966), 16mm, film still

Figure 3.7: BREAKAWAY (1966), 16mm, film strip

Figure 3.8: Anton Giulia Bragaglia, *Change of Position* (1911), photograph

Figure 3.9: VIVIAN (1964), 16mm, film still

Figure 3.10: THE WHITE ROSE (1967), 16mm, film still

Chapter Four

Figure 4.1: REPORT (1963-1967), 16mm, film strip

Figure 4.2: REPORT (1963-1967), 16mm, film still

Figure 4.3: TELEVISION ASSASSINATION (1963-64/1995), 8mm, film stills

Figure 2.4: Ant Farm, *Media Burn* (1975), video still

Figure 4.5: Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco, *The Eternal Frame* (1975), video still

Figure 4.6: MARILYN TIMES FIVE (1968-1973), 16mm, film still

Figure 4.7: MARILYN TIMES FIVE (1968-1973), 16mm, film still

Figures 4.8: Andy Warhol, *Marilyn (Reversals Series)* (1979-86)

Figures 4.9: Andy Warhol, *Marilyn (Reversals Series)* (1979-86)

Figure 4.10: Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978-79), video stills

Figure 4.11: CROSSROADS (1976), 35mm, film still

Figure 4.12: CROSSROADS (1976), 35mm, film still

Figure 4.13: Harold E. Edgerton, *Atomic Test Explosion* (n.d.), photograph

Figure 4.14: PERMIAN STRATA (1969), 16mm, film still

Figure 4.15: TAKE THE 5:10 TO DREAMLAND (1977), 16mm, film still

Figure 4.16: VALSE TRISTE (1978), 16mm, film still

Conclusion

Figure 5.1: EASTER MORNING (1966/2008), 8mm/digital, video still

INTRODUCTION: BOMBHEAD

In 1989, the year the Berlin Wall fell and marked the beginning of the end of the Cold War, American artist Bruce Conner (1933-2008) created an atomic self-portrait, BOMBHEAD (fig. I.1).¹ In this photo collage, Conner depicts himself dressed in military uniform, with a small nuclear insignia affixed to his tie, standing rigidly against a backdrop of cloud-filled sky. In place of a head stands a single, iconic image: the atomic mushroom cloud. By casting himself as a hyper-masculine, militarized version of the atomic-era subject, Conner gives new meaning to the term “bombshell.” But he also invites us to wonder about the implications of this explosive self-erasure, the “death of the artist” re-imagined as nuclear apocalypse.

By the time he made BOMBHEAD, Conner was already an established visual artist who had achieved success in a wide variety of artistic media, including assemblage, collage, drawing, printmaking, live performance, photography, and small-gauge film, the medium which will be the focus of this study. Born in McPherson, Kansas in 1933, and raised in nearby Wichita, Conner came of age during World War II, and began his artistic career at the height of the Cold War fifties. Since 1957, Conner spent the majority of his adult life in San Francisco, a city with a thriving artistic vanguard and vibrant counterculture that, nonetheless, has remained on the periphery of dominant narratives of postwar American art history. BOMBHEAD is thus a self-portrait of Conner’s many identities: Midwestern American male, critical Cold War subject, countercultural artist, and above all, I argue, avant-garde filmmaker. Like the atomic masquerade of BOMBHEAD, Conner also assumed many different roles and (dis)guises through his filmmaking practice, which he used as a platform for navigating the dominant myths, ideological frameworks, and cultural “fallout” of the Cold War. This dissertation will attempt to disentangle

¹ Throughout his career, Conner specified that the titles of all of his works appear in all-capital letters and no italics; this dissertation adheres to this convention.

his films' key components—the man (Conner), mask, myth, and meaning—against the backdrop of Cold War America.

Conner's status within the discipline of art history primarily relies on his short-lived assemblage practice, which he began in the late 1950s and gave up by the early 1960s.² Yet, within the sub-field of avant-garde cinema history, Conner is firmly established as one of the most innovative filmmakers of his generation. In this sense, he has developed a divided reputation as an eminent avant-garde filmmaker but comparatively marginal visual artist. Conner's "minor" art historical status is partially attributable to his career-long cultivation of obscurity and opposition to the commercial art world, but it is also due to the discipline's geographic bias in favor of East Coast artists, especially those located in the cultural epicenter of New York City. This dissertation will diverge from previous studies of Conner by focusing almost exclusively on his work in the film medium, and situating these works within the context of postwar American art and cultural history. I examine Conner's filmmaking over a period of fifty years—from his groundbreaking work with found footage, to the visionary works he produced with his own camera, and finally, those works he completed with the assistance of digital editing in the last years of his life. Through detailed visual analysis, the following chapters explore how Conner's films give expression to the dystopian anxieties and utopian aspirations that epitomized the so-called "atomic age," a period dating from the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, which peaked during the Cuban Missile Crisis of the early 1960s, and was reignited by Reagan's combative Cold War rhetoric in the 1980s.

² The term "assemblage" refers to a hybrid medium of three-dimensional sculptural collage comprised of found objects, mass media fragments, and other appropriated materials. In 1961, MoMA curator William Seitz organized the landmark exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*, with works by Conner and fellow Californians George Herms and Ed Kienholz, grouped alongside Picasso's Cubist collages, Duchamp's readymades and Rauschenberg's "combines." See William Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961).

The close ties between Conner's aesthetic and atomic age America—both the literal existential threat of the bomb, and the era's dominant visual culture—were initially identified as a key component of his assemblage practice. In a 1962 issue of *Artforum*, Philip Leider noted that Conner's assemblages "visualize the loveliest flesh charred beyond recognition. The data which informs this work is that of the extermination camps, Hiroshima, horror comics, sexual psychopathology, lunatic feminine adornment."³ Leider's catalog of dark references is more than a list of Conner's influences, for it captures the push-and-pull opposition between competing drives—*Eros* and *Thanatos*, agony and ecstasy, humor and horror, terror and beauty—forces that Conner's work puts into dialectical tension. In what follows, I argue that these same tensions also find expression in Conner's films through the paradoxical aesthetic experience of the "atomic sublime," a term that I use to denote the chiasmus of terrible beauty and beautiful terror.⁴

My formulation of the "atomic sublime" is rooted in the classic philosophical category of the sublime, which is closely identified with the late 18th century philosophical writings of Edmund Burke (1729-1797) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).⁵ As described by Burke and Kant, the sublime is an aesthetic experience that threatens to exceed human perception and representation, usually in the form of an overwhelming encounter with a natural phenomenon too

³ Philip Leider, "Bruce Conner: A New Sensibility," *Artforum* 1, no. 6 (December 1962): 30.

⁴ The only previous usage of the term "atomic sublime" that I have been able to locate is Peter B. Hales, "The Atomic Sublime," *American Studies* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 5–31. Hales discusses the image of the atomic bomb across a wide range of Cold War cultural phenomena.

⁵ Burke's treatise on the sublime was written in 1757, when he was just 18. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: Penguin Books, 1998). Kant authored two major texts on the sublime, the first, a short text of "Observations" published in 1763, the second, as part of his analysis of aesthetic judgment in his third critique, published in 1790. Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1960). Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Eric Matthews and Paul Guyer (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

vast in scale or too overwhelmingly threatening (Kant's mathematical and dynamical sublime, respectively) to comprehend. Though it is often associated with the beautiful and pleasurable in everyday parlance, the philosophical concept of the sublime is actually bound to the feelings of terror and pain, according to Burke's definition:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling... When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience.⁶

Here, Burke specifies that the sublime experience depends upon a certain distance and security from the threat of pain or death, and stems from the knowledge that, however terrifying the spectacle, it will not harm or destroy the spectator. This sublime distance is what transforms something terrible and threatening into something awe-inspiring, and paradoxically, pleasurable.

Infinitesimal in scale yet infinite in number, supra-sensible yet omnipresent, the atom provides a representational system for comprehending, and therefore rationalizing, the natural world, and yet it eludes the grasp of human perception due to its scale, quantity, and power. Though all matter is in some sense "atomic," the ability to harness the atom is a distinctly modern technological achievement. The notion of the "atomic sublime," therefore, refers not to an encounter with an overwhelming natural force, but with the *unnatural* force of human culture, and specifically, modern technology; it is a mediated sublimity, enabled by, and specific, to modernity.⁷

⁶ Burke, 86.

⁷ Although Kant had reservations about whether the category of the sublime applied to cultural objects, especially fine art, and originally restricted his definition of sublime experience to encounters with natural phenomena, aesthetic philosopher Paul Crowther explains how Kant's theory can be expanded to include fine art: "Kant's theory can encompass the domain of human artifice, without much further modification. If some human artefact is of colossal size or of terrifying power, or employs images which successfully invoke a sense of such overwhelming

Besides Enlightenment-era philosophy, my concept of the “atomic sublime” also draws from the notion of the “technological sublime,” a term that emerged from postwar discourses on the specifically American experience of modernity, landscape, and technology. The term “technological sublime” appears in two defining texts in the discipline of American Studies, Perry Miller’s landmark 1965 work of American intellectual history, *The Life of the Mind in America*, and Leo Marx’s seminal study of American literature from 1964, *The Machine in the Garden*.⁸ In the mid-1990s, David E. Nye (a student of Leo Marx) revisited the notion of the sublime in terms of the history of technology in America since the early 19th century, through a series of case studies, including steamboats and locomotives, bridges and dams, factories and skyscrapers, and in the postwar era, the moon landing and the atomic bomb.⁹ Nye argues that the invention of the atomic bomb fundamentally changed the concept of the sublime:

At the deepest level, the existence of atomic weapons has undermined the possibility of the sublime relationship to both natural and technological objects. The experience of the natural rests both on the sense of human weakness and limitation and on the power of human reason to comprehend the infinitely large and powerful. But when human beings themselves create something infinitely powerful that can annihilate nature, the exaltation of the classic sublime seems impossible.¹⁰

properties, then this can serve to make vivid the extraordinary scope of human *artifice* itself. Something, in other words, which is encountered as problematic from the viewpoint of sense-perception, enables the rich scope of a rational capacity—in this case artifice—to become all the more manifest and enjoyable." Paul Crowther, "The Kantian Sublime, the Avant-Garde and the Postmodern: A Critique of Lyotard," in *Jean-François Lyotard*, ed. Victor E. Taylor and Gregg Lambert, *Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory* (Routledge, 2006), 73.

⁸ See Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965). Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). Another notable work in American Studies that employs this concept is John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), in which Kasson describes the consumer spectacle and mechanical thrill rides on the Coney Island boardwalk as instances of the “technological sublime.” (Kasson, 74)

⁹ David E. Nye, “Atomic Bomb and Apollo XI: New Forms of the Dynamic Sublime,” in *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 225–256.

¹⁰ Nye, 255.

Within art history, the category of the sublime is closely identified with 19th-century Romanticism, such as the landscape paintings of the German artist Caspar David Friedrich, the stormy seascapes of the British painter J.M.W. Turner, and, in North America, the majestic landscapes of the Hudson River School. Yet, within 20th century American art, the sublime is most commonly associated with abstract painting, and specifically with the generation of painters directly preceding Conner—the Abstract Expressionists. For Barnett Newman, the sublime was a major theme in both his paintings, such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51), and in his writings, as in his 1948 essay, “The Sublime is Now.”¹¹ In 1961, the American art critic and historian Robert Rosenblum published an influential essay called “The Abstract Sublime,” in which he compares the Abstract Expressionists, including Newman, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Jackson Pollock, to the Romantics Turner and Friedrich. Two years after Rosenblum’s article first appeared in *Art News*, the British art critic Lawrence Alloway used the phrase “the American Sublime” to describe Abstract Expressionist painting, though he challenged some of the terms used in Rosenblum’s essay.¹²

Newman, Rosenblum, and Alloway’s writings on the sublime provide a basis for art historian Caroline Jones’s discussion of the critical role of this aesthetic category in postwar American art.¹³ In *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist*, a play on the title of Leo Marx’s book, Jones argues that three of the major art movements of the 1960s,

¹¹ Barnett Newman, “The Sublime Is Now,” *Tiger’s Eye* 1, no. 6 (December 1948): 51–53. Reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul J. Wood, *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 580-581.

¹² See Robert Rosenblum, “The Abstract Sublime,” *Art News* 59, no. 10 (February 1961). Rosenblum elaborates on his argument about the link between Romantic painting and Abstract Expressionism in Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (Harper & Row, 1975). Also see Lawrence Alloway, “The American Sublime,” *Living Arts* 1, no. 2 (June 1963): 11–22.

¹³ Caroline A. Jones, “The Romance of the Studio and the Abstract Expressionist Sublime,” in *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1–59.

Pop, Minimalist and Earthworks—exemplified by the work of Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, and Robert Smithson—shifted away from the classical, romantic conception of the sublime embraced by Abstract Expressionism and towards a industrial or technological sublime: “It is this *mythos* of the Promethean Abstract Expressionist artist—burning with creative fire, yet eternally doomed to a bitter, self-consuming process of self-scrutiny—that provided a dramatic backdrop to the laconic laborers of the ensuing technological sublime.”¹⁴ Jones’s distinction between these two different modes of the sublime in postwar American art is helpful for understanding how Conner’s atomic sublime cinema oscillates between them—on the one hand, extending the romantic vision of Promethean creativity embodied by Abstract Expressionism, and on the other, through his use of mechanically reproduced images, aligned with the “laconic laborers” of the succeeding generation of 1960s artists.¹⁵

Certainly, many of Conner’s 1960s contemporaries also explored the intersections between the violent and the sublime, the apocalyptic and the redemptive. One notable example is Andy Warhol, whose work exhibits an ongoing preoccupation with the glossy, glamorous surface aesthetics of the mass media, which he often infused with explicitly religious or quasi-

¹⁴ Jones, 57.

¹⁵ Later, in the early-to-mid 1980s, French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard wrote extensively on the “postmodern sublime,” a category that he used to describe the violent transmutation of physical matter into data during the information age. Through his writings and in his pioneering 1985 exhibition *Les Immatériaux* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Lyotard was especially concerned with establishing how works of avant-garde art, from abstract painting to conceptual art, function as objects of sublime experience by “presenting the unrepresentable.” To some degree, this is what Conner’s films do, in their representation of “unrepresentable” experiences, such as erotic pleasure, death, or apocalyptic annihilation. See Jean-François Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” *Artforum* 22, no. 8 (April 1984): 36–43; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report On Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Jean-François Lyotard, “Presenting the Unrepresentable: The Sublime,” *Artforum* 20, no. 8 (April 1982): 64–69. However, the following chapters do not invoke Lyotard’s postmodern recapitulation of the sublime. This is, in part, because his category is aesthetically and historically too capacious, and potentially applicable to an extremely broad range of art objects. But, more importantly, it is also because I argue (especially in Chapter Four) against the notion that Conner’s films reflect a straightforward postmodern sensibility, one that was influentially described by Frederic Jameson as foregrounding strategies and qualities such as ironic distance, pastiche, and blank affect. Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 111–125.

existential themes. Key examples include his silkscreened celebrity portraits, which function both as icons of veneration and spectral death masks; the candy-colored electric chairs, car crashes, and atomic bomb blasts of the *Death and Disasters* series; and one of his final paintings, *Camouflage Last Supper* (1986), which layers military camouflage over a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's famous biblical scene. Yet, even if Conner's films are not unique in their co-mingling of the secular and the sacred, the violent and the sublime, his approach, I argue, was nevertheless distinctive. Though Conner's films, especially his early films, are often characterized by stark juxtaposition, they resist a dualistic logic of schematic opposition and antagonism (sex vs. death) in favor of a more dialectical, non-dualistic approach. Through his filmmaking practice, Conner was increasingly interested in the chiasmic intertwining of oppositional terms across various points of conjunction, as if tracing the curves of a figure eight instead of volleying back and forth between two points. Rather than stress incommensurability, opposition, and separation, Conner's films insist that each term is always infused with or contaminated by its dialectical other.¹⁶

The chiasmic structure of Conner's atomic sublime—terrible beauty, beautiful terror—is most explicit in his 1976 film *CROSSROADS*, his most sustained and masterful visual exegesis on the atomic threat, and the work that lends this dissertation its title. In *CROSSROADS*, the rhetorical criss-cross of the chiasmus finds triple expression: in the “terrible beauty” of the atomic mushroom cloud; through the structuring metaphor of the “crossroads,” as a decisive turning-point or fork-in-the-road; and finally, in the visual symbolism of the crosshairs, a

¹⁶ In this sense, Conner's crossings recall the chiasmus that psychoanalytic theorist Jean Laplanche claims as a dominant hermeneutic for understanding the intersection of *Eros*, or the egoic life drives, and *Thanatos*, the death drive, in his influential reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. See Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985). Though I do not employ a psychoanalytic approach in the following, I borrow the terminology of *Eros* and *Thanatos* in my reading of the tense oscillation between the life and death drives that Conner's films visualize.

recurring motif in this and many of Conner's other films. In *CROSSROADS* and elsewhere, the intersecting axes of the crosshairs recall those of the Christian crucifix, another iconic emblem that Conner repeatedly invokes. Serving as a principal metaphor, structuring motif, and recurring symbol in Conner's films, the crossroads—as intersection, target point, and religious symbol—supplies the “x” that marks the spot of his atomic sublime aesthetic.

Conner's chiasmic criss-crossing of sublime beauty and apocalyptic terror finds its clearest expression in his invocation of the mushroom cloud. This iconic image was a trademark of Conner's early work, beginning with his first film, *A MOVIE* (1958), which, like *CROSSROADS*, is a “camera-less” film made primarily from fragments of pre-existing footage. Unlike *CROSSROADS*'s patient examination of footage shot during a single explosion, *A MOVIE* employs a diverse range of imagery drawn from various second-hand sources, including vintage newsreels, soft-core pornography, educational films, and mass-market home movies. Conner compiled these snippets into a densely packed montage, and then added an epic orchestral soundtrack, Ottorino Respighi's “Pines of Rome.” The resulting twelve-minute film is often called a “visual assault,” because of the film's virtuosic, rapid-fire procession of seemingly arbitrary images, from the suspenseful and erotic (car chases, tightrope walkers, a striptease), to the shocking and disastrous (the Hindenburg in flames, atomic explosions, Mussolini's hanging corpse), to the inappropriate and outmoded (film leader, misleading titles, and grainy, spoiled film stock).

Yet, Conner's atomic sublime aesthetic was not confined to his use of atomic iconography. It is also present in his use of the feminine archetype of the “bombshell,” a term that denotes a threatening, “explosive” form of female sexuality, which entered the popular

lexicon during the postwar period.¹⁷ Conner's early films, *A MOVIE* and *COSMIC RAY*, prominently feature the symbolic "bombshell" figure, explicitly linking her with images of militarism and violence, and often, the atomic bomb itself. In these works, Conner's juxtaposition of the actual bomb with its gendered personification suggests a struggle between militarism as a destructive, oppressive force and female sexuality as a creative, life-giving force. A later work, *MARILYN TIMES FIVE* (1968-1973), is a posthumous found footage portrait of one of the most tragic postwar American "blonde bombshells," Marilyn Monroe. The film is comprised of grainy, black-and-white footage taken from a vintage pornographic film whose star uncannily resembles a young Monroe, prompting viewers to question her true identity. Conner's appropriation and replication of the glamorous bombshell's image infuses it with both haunting ambiguity and a kind of "sublime pathos;" this tension between agony and ecstasy stands in sharp contrast to the famous serialized Marilyns of Andy Warhol and other Pop artists' use of the celebrity image.

The atomic sublime is also visualized in Conner's "self-authored" films, particularly in what I refer to as his psychedelic films of the mid-1960s. For instance, in *BREAKAWAY* (1966) a black-and-white dance film featuring a performance by Toni Basil, Conner reprises the bombshell archetype, but with a difference. *BREAKAWAY* utilizes psychedelic visual effects to render the female body as a spectral, otherworldly figure whose bodily dissolution symbolizes a spiritual release from the everyday world, or, as the films' lively pop soundtrack proclaims, a "breakaway from the chains that bind." As such, the film re-envision physical annihilation as a form of sublime transcendence, and significantly, it codes this experience as feminine. Thus, in both *BREAKAWAY* and *MARILYN TIMES FIVE*, the "bombshell" appears solo, without the

¹⁷ Though Hollywood actress Jean Harlow was referred to as a "bombshell" as early as 1933, the term rose to prominence with the onset of WWII.

literal presence of a mushroom cloud; nevertheless, her eroticized body is charged with meaning, and assumes the status of an existential battleground, a stage for the struggle between life and death.¹⁸

Beyond his archetypal Cold War iconography of bombs and bombshells, Conner's atomic sublime also stems from his interest in testing and expanding the thresholds of perception, often through the use of "subliminal" effects—a term closely related to "sublime." Subliminal messaging is often associated with psychological manipulation, especially in advertising campaigns, and was an especially popular topic in media discourse during the paranoid Cold War years, as evidenced by Vance Packard's bestselling 1957 book, *The Hidden Persuaders* (discussed in Chapter One). Conner's evolving interest in "subliminal" visual effects came on the heels of experimentation with psychedelic drugs in the early 1960s. In *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* (1959-1967), Conner intercuts street views of San Francisco with scenes of rural Mexico shot during a "mushroom-hunting" excursion with Timothy Leary, a leading proponent of psychedelic drugs. To this kaleidoscopic array of colorful, hypnotic imagery, Conner added a psychedelic rock 'n' roll soundtrack, The Beatles' "Tomorrow Never Knows." *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* uses rapid montage patterns to produce subliminal (i.e. *up-to-the-threshold*) effects that imitate the experience of expanded consciousness, or a "trip" that ventures beyond "the doors of perception," the title of Aldous Huxley's 1954 book about taking mescaline, which he borrowed from William Blake's 1793 poem "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell." More than

¹⁸ However critical of mainstream cultural values, Conner's films trafficked in prevalent Cold War-era cultural anxieties, especially through their linking of atomic apocalypse with female sexuality. American cultural historian Elaine Tyler May describes that during the 1950s, sexuality, particularly women's sexuality, became discursively entwined with violence, death, and specifically, with the threat of nuclear apocalypse, in intricate and often disturbing ways. May concludes that the Cold War was not confined to the economic and political struggles between superpowers; it also inaugurated a cultural crisis on the domestic front: "It was not just nuclear energy that had to be contained, but the social and sexual fallout of the atomic age itself." See May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 73.

just escapist fantasies, Conner's psychedelic films thus resist the technocratic logic of Cold War America, and its ideologically-enforced climate of political paranoia, social conformity, and sexual repression.¹⁹

The psycho-geographic metaphor of the "trip" brings us back to the geographic metaphor of the "crossroads," which describes the intersecting forces that framed Conner's filmmaking practice during the Cold War, a period in which rapid technological, cultural, economic, political, and artistic changes were accompanied by a tightening of social conventions, and in turn, an explosion of countercultural resistance. During this period, American artists faced a conceptual turning point, heralded by neo-avant-garde challenges to high modernist aesthetics, and the rapid proliferation of inter- and mixed media experimentation. The postwar era was also a critical juncture in film history, as the waning of the classical Hollywood studio system ushered in the European New Waves and other independent cinemas. Conner navigated these postwar transitions from his position as a San-Francisco-based artist who remained marginally involved in both the New York-dominated art world and the Los Angeles-centric entertainment industry. Determined to maintain his independence, Conner's participation in these arenas was selective and strategic, enabling him to pursue his sublime vision free from external pressures. In turn, Conner cultivated a life-long reputation as an artistic outsider, a quintessential American rebel, not beholden to rules, conventions, and economic imperatives.

¹⁹ The term "technocracy" was used by historian Theodore Roszak in his 1968 book *The Making of a Counterculture* to refer to the rise of corporate and military-industrial sectors' influence over American society during the Cold War period. Postwar American affluence, Roszak argued, enabled the baby-boomer generation to resist this technocratic logic through direct political protest, anti-consumerism, and a wide range of unconventional lifestyle choices, often emphasizing sexual liberation and psychedelic experimentation. Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995). Conner's participation in and attitude towards the counterculture is a recurring topic throughout this dissertation.

Within the American cultural imaginary, the “crossroads” metaphor also plays a role in the myth of the independent American (male), a myth that Conner aspired to embody. The metaphor and the myth converge in one archetypal American narrative of the “crossroads” as an existential dilemma: “Cross Road Blues,” a song that was popularized by the legendary African American bluesman Robert Johnson in 1936, and has been covered by many musicians since. Though the lyrics of “Cross Road Blues” relate the simple story of a man trying to hitch a ride by the roadside, the song is frequently (and perhaps erroneously) interpreted as an allegorical account of how Johnson sold his soul to the devil in return for his virtuosic guitar skills.²⁰ In this classic Faustian scenario, the musician encounters the devil at the “crossroads,” and offers his eternal soul in exchange for mastery of the blues.

In Johnson’s personal mythology, the “crossroads” is the symbolic site where one strikes a deal with the devil in order to acquire expertise (knowledge) and mastery (power). This allegorical reading of the “crossroads” can also be projected back on to Conner’s *CROSSROADS*, a film that captures the post-lapsarian spirit of the atomic age, when humans became the technical masters of a destructive power that they could not fully control. Both the title and the source footage used in Conner’s film are directly drawn from “Operation Crossroads,” the 1946 underwater nuclear tests at Bikini Atoll that marked a turning point in modern technological warfare, a symbolic “crossroads” where paths must be chosen and difficult choices made. Perhaps unwittingly, the military officials who named the tests “Operation Crossroads” were also invoking a far more dubious mythology—that of the blues man’s sinister contract with the devil, in which technical mastery comes at the high cost of eternal

²⁰ Historians of the blues have disputed the notion that the Faustian mythology originated with Johnson himself. Still, this interpretation of “Cross Road Blues” as a Satanic pact remains popular, probably due to its roots in African American vernacular culture. For more on Johnson and the crossroads, see Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock “N” Roll Music* (E.P. Dutton, 1976).

condemnation. Conner's CROSSROADS weaves together these archetypal American mythologies of personal independence and tragic hubris, uniting them under the aesthetic mantle of the atomic sublime.

It is not so far-fetched to introduce the legend of a depression-era Mississippi bluesman into my reading of Conner's atomic sublime. As a lifelong admirer of African American musical traditions, especially rhythm and blues, jazz, and gospel, Conner was undoubtedly aware of the "Cross Road Blues" and of the legend of Johnson's mythical pact.²¹ Indeed, one of the primary and recurring arguments in this study is that Conner's deep artistic investment in and identification with black culture were a core feature of his filmmaking practice. For instance, COSMIC RAY, one of Conner's most important films, was made as an homage to the blind R&B musician Ray Charles, with Conner describing the film as an attempt at giving Charles the gift of sight: "I was supplying his vision." Later, in 1967, Conner chose "Sketches of Spain" by Miles Davis to accompany THE WHITE ROSE, a film-portrait of his close friend, artist Jay DeFeo, and her massive painting, *The Rose* (1958-1966).

Conner demonstrated an even deeper commitment to *preserving* black musical traditions through his decades-long struggle to raise funds for a feature-length documentary about The Soul Stirrers, a Kansas-based gospel group that he listened to since his youth, which is most famous for launching the career of R&B singer Sam Cooke. Starting in the early 1980s, Conner travelled across the country meeting former members of the group, performing interviews and even organizing a reunion concert for the Stirrers. Lacking the resources and energy to complete the

²¹ "Cross Road Blues" was also widely covered by contemporary rock groups like The Doors and Cream. Cream recorded a live version of "Crossroads" at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco on March 10, 1968. Considering Conner's participation in psychedelic light shows at the Avalon and Fillmore Ballrooms around this time, it is not hard to imagine that he heard about this version of the song, or was perhaps even present at its recording.

project in the final years of his life, Conner opted to make a short found footage film that is dedicated to the Stirrers, called *HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW* (2006), named after a famous gospel hymn that the group recorded with Marvin Gaye in 1964. This film combines brightly-saturated interview footage of the group's founding members, with Depression-era found footage showing African American men queuing up to receive work assignments and performing manual labor, with other images of black American experience in the decades before the triumphs of the Civil Rights movement.

These works signify more than Conner's admiration for African American music, they indicate the special sense of affinity that he reserved for black musicians as artistic virtuosos, and in a certain sense, creative surrogates. For Conner, like many white artists, writers and musicians after WWII and still today, "blackness" encodes an authenticity born out of struggle, creative spontaneity, personal and sexual freedom conditioned by oppression, and a sublime otherness that is captured by that ineffable quality of "soul"—these of course all being racist stereotypes casting dark-skinned people of color as somehow more instinctual or closer to nature than whites. But rather than dismiss Conner's enthusiasm for black music as a symptomatic trait of the mid-century "hipster" or "white negro," as described in 1957 by Norman Mailer, I consider it crucial to attend to the influence of black culture, and especially black music, on Conner's vision of a Cold War America rife with violence, consumerism, and exploitation, and yet imbued with explosive, utopian possibilities.²²

²² According to one contemporary critic, Thomas Kent Alexander, the San Francisco underground film scene of the 1960s—a group including Bruce Baillie, Robert Nelson, Bruce Conner, Ben Van Meter, Kenneth Anger, Robert Feldman, Carl Linder, and brief mention of two women filmmakers, Dorothy Wiley and Gunvor Nelson—constituted a "hipster cinema," advocating anti-authoritarian, non-conformist, and countercultural values, often through stated affinities with people of color, student activists, homosexuals, hippies, and other minoritarian groups, and close attention to the natural environment. See Thomas Kent Alexander, "San Francisco's Hipster Cinema," *Film Culture*, no. 44 (1967): 70–74. Though hipster terminology dates back to at least the 1940s, the concept is closely associated with Norman Mailer's "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," *Dissent* (Summer 1957).

Throughout this study, I aim to unpack the racial politics of Conner's films, even when they are subtle, unpictured, or "off-screen," so to speak. In this sense, I attempt to lend supporting evidence to David E. James's observation that "African American music has been overwhelmingly influential on American culture as a whole but especially on avant-garde film," a point that remains unacknowledged in most existing writing in the field of avant-garde film studies.²³ James goes on to state that the American underground cinema of the 1950s and 1960s is best understood as an attempt on the part of a group of (almost exclusively) white male filmmakers to "reenact or recreate in film the intensity, complexity, improvisational spontaneity, and other formal properties of modern jazz and also the social function of the jazz musician." Yet, even if it is commonly acknowledged that jazz was a major influence on the postwar American avant-garde—particularly Beat literature and Abstract Expressionist painting—few have examined the complex and highly-charged racial politics behind these influences and exchanges, a problem that my dissertation aims to remedy.

Beyond his passion for African American musical traditions, Conner integrated a wide range of musical genres into his films, from rock 'n' roll to punk, pop to avant-garde minimalism. His unrestrained experimentation with a wide variety of musical genres indicates his refusal of aesthetic hierarchies between high and low culture, which enabled him to harness the sublime energies of both avant-garde and popular music alike. In each of the films I discuss in this dissertation, the audio functions as more than just a "soundtrack," it is a structurally integral component of the work's concept and structure, linking it to other, more commonplace modes of

²³ James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*, 253. James includes in his history of LA cinema the wide-ranging career of Dudley Murphy, the American filmmaker who made *Ballet Mécanique* with Fernand Léger in 1924, and went on to make a number of avant-garde films in Los Angeles over the next two decades. During the 1940s, Murphy directed at least ten "Soundies," jukebox musical films that were early precursors to music video. Soundies and their successors, Scopitones, are discussed in Chapter Three.

cultural consumption and participation—for instance, watching television, playing a record, or attending a concert—practices that otherwise might seem inconsistent with the lofty status often accorded to avant-garde cinema.

*

*

*

In the following paragraphs, I summarize each of the dissertation’s four chapters. Bearing in mind the intermittency and revisionism of Conner’s filmmaking process—in which he often spent years on multiple edits of film, destroying versions he was dissatisfied with—the dissertation has been organized in a loosely chronological fashion that attempts to trace Conner’s evolution as a filmmaker rather than provide a strict account for his activities by year.²⁴

Chapter One, entitled “Fallout Films: Sex, Race, and the Bomb in *A MOVIE* (1958) and *COSMIC RAY* (1961),” looks closely at Conner’s first two films, both found footage films, in light of Cold War cultural politics. The chapter begins with an overview and tentative taxonomy of found footage film, laying the groundwork for a revised reading of *A MOVIE* that both reconsiders the found footage genre and dominant narratives of avant-garde film history. I describe in detail how *A MOVIE* utilizes a specifically Cold War iconography, including its discursive linking of the sexually provocative “bombshell” with the image of the atomic explosions, and how these pairings perform a critique of Cold War sexual politics. *A MOVIE*, I argue, not only inaugurates Conner’s gendered vision of the atomic sublime, it also generates a distinctive interpretation of the film medium, through its creative recycling of the medium’s forgotten cast-offs. In general, this chapter attempts to re-invigorate the longstanding, and

²⁴ A strict chronology of Conner’s films is further complicated by the fact that he typically worked on many different films simultaneously, and sometimes shelved certain films before returning to them years, even decades, later. For instance, Conner dates the three-minute, sound version of *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* from 1959-1967, but in 1996, he created an expanded, fourteen-minute version with a different soundtrack by Terry Riley.

somewhat exhausted, debates over avant-garde film and medium specificity by considering how *A MOVIE* challenges dominant narratives that are motivated by high modernist imperatives.

The second part of this chapter examines Conner's second film, *COSMIC RAY* (1961), which combines original footage of a bohemian bombshell, Beth Pewther, with a wide range of found footage material. Like *A MOVIE*, *COSMIC RAY* includes numerous visual analogies between the female body and military aggression, but here, the montage is edited to match the pulsing rhythms of Ray Charles's R&B hit "What'd I Say." The result is Conner's first "subliminal" film, a lightning-quick montage of sex and death imagery that mirrors the visual style and psychologically suggestive content of contemporary advertising. Furthermore, by designating Ray Charles as the film's "cosmic" center, Conner casts the blind African American musician in the role of sublime superhero, the antithesis of the explosive atomic subject pictured in *BOMBHEAD*. Overall, this chapter is invested in unpacking how Conner's first two films navigated these complex intersections of gender, race, and the mass media, and laid the foundation for his work of the following two decades.

The second chapter, "'No End of the Beginning': *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* (1959-1967), *Light Shows*, and *Heterotopic Cinema*," focuses on the evolution of Conner's practice during the early-to-mid-1960s, away from the Manichean vision of sex versus death of his earlier films, towards a newly optimistic vision inflected by the utopian spirit of the psychedelic counterculture. The chapter focuses largely on *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* (1959-1967), a film comprised of footage Conner shot in Mexico during the early 1960s. If his year in Mexico was an attempt to escape from the ominous shadow of the mushroom cloud, a symbol of atomic anxiety, once there, he went "looking" for a different form of mushroom, that of the psychedelic *psilocybin*, renowned for its "explosive" effects on consciousness. This

chapter is largely historical in scope, detailing Conner's involvement with the burgeoning psychedelic counterculture, including large-scale, public "trips" like the San Francisco Trips Festival, Ken Kesey and the Merry Prankster's Acid Tests, and the Human Be-In. Looking ahead to 1967-68, I detail Conner's involvement in psychedelic light shows as a member of Ben Van Meter's North American Ibis Alchemical Company. Ultimately, this chapter traces how Conner's interest in the psychedelic experience, as well as his fascination with the subaltern landscapes of Mexico, signaled an evolution in his atomic sublime aesthetic and his thinking about cinematic temporality, paving the way for his later work.

Chapter Three, entitled "BREAKAWAY (1966): Pop Culture, Collaboration, Feminism," examines another example of Conner's psychedelic turn, BREAKAWAY (1966). Arguably his most collaborative film, BREAKAWAY features choreography and vocals by Conner's friend, the dancer/choreographer/actress, Toni Basil. Like COSMIC RAY, BREAKAWAY is often cited as a progenitor of the music video format due to its rhythmic editing and quasi-synaesthetic visualization of sound. Still, as a work of avant-garde cinema, BREAKAWAY is as entertaining as it is challenging, offering a profound (and potentially feminist) meditation on the atomic sublime in the unexpected guise of go-go-dancing. BREAKAWAY was filmed in Santa Monica, and thus also represents a curious "crossroads" between the avant-garde and the entertainment industry. This chapter concludes with a discussion of Conner's work in the commercial entertainment industry, which he viewed as less of a Faustian bargain (as described in "Cross Roads Blues") than a mutually beneficial exchange.

The fourth and final chapter, "Sublime Time: Found Footage Motion Studies," focuses on a group of three found footage films that I group together as a trilogy: REPORT (1963-1967), MARILYN TIMES FIVE (1968-1973), and CROSSROADS (1976). These films all utilize

repetition rather than a progressive or sequential narrative in order to radically defamiliarize the audience from their iconic subjects, rendering them uncanny and disturbing. In postwar American art, the use of *repetition* as an aesthetic strategy is often associated with Pop Art, particularly with Andy Warhol's iconic silkscreen prints. Within postwar avant-garde film history, on the other hand, repetition is typically associated with the medium-specific investigations of "structural film," a term coined by film critic P. Adams Sitney in 1969. This chapter argues that Conner's approach to repetition is distinct from both Warholian seriality and structural medium-specificity, and instead offers a salient critique of the mass media image—in terms of its epistemological status, its relation to historical memory, and its uncanny temporality. The chapter concludes by examining two of Conner's found footage films of the late 1970s, TAKE THE 5:10 TO DREAMLAND (1977) and VALSE TRISTE (1978), which both take on the structure and appearance of the more "private" realm of dreams and childhood memories in order to envision a moment before the existential anxiety ushered in by the atomic age.

In the conclusion, I offer a brief overview of Conner's late-1970s participation in the Bay Area's nascent punk rock scene, which resulted in three films that are often described as "music videos." These films mark a dramatic departure from the atomic sublime of CROSSROADS and instead, embrace the ironic distancing and blank affect that typify postmodernism. I contrast these films with Conner's final film, EASTER MORNING (2008), which I believe represents a summary instance of his atomic sublime aesthetic. By re-contextualizing Conner's cinematic output against the backdrop of Cold War cultural history, the overall aim of this study is to reassess both his under-acknowledged significance for postwar American art history and his enduring legacy in contemporary visual culture. Throughout, I take Conner's filmmaking practice as an opportunity to reconsider how the relationship between avant-garde art and its

surrounding cultural context, and especially the mass media, is driven as much by mutual exchange as antagonism—a paradox that his films make startlingly, sublimely clear.

Chapter One

Fallout Films: Sex, Race, and the Bomb in A MOVIE (1958) and COSMIC RAY (1961)

The scene is about looking, its pleasures and hazards. It opens on the interior of a submarine, where a naval officer is leaning forward to peer into a periscope. Instead of an enemy ship, he spies a bikini-clad woman lounging on a bed, who smiles as she directs her gaze towards the lens. The woman vaguely resembles a young Marilyn Monroe, which adds a dash of intrigue to the scenario (fig. 1.1). The sequence of shots implies an eye-line match between the man and the reclining woman, who seems to return and even invite his look. Next, the “peeping tom” turns away from the periscope to issue a command. Then, there is a close-up on a hand reaching forward to push a large button, which prompts an underwater missile to launch into the water. The culminating shots are of an atomic mushroom cloud, viewed from the ground and from the air. In a comical postscript, surfers and rowers ride the waves that were ostensibly produced by this underwater explosion. In total, the scene lasts less than ten seconds. However condensed its narrative arc, the chain reaction is explicit: a mere glimpse of the sexually available woman provokes atomic destruction (fig. 1.2).

So goes the most famous scene from A MOVIE (1958), Bruce Conner’s first and most widely known film. A landmark of “found footage film,” A MOVIE is comprised primarily of pre-existing footage—fragments of vintage newsreels, soft-core “girlie movies,” low-budget film serials and shorts designed for home viewing, and various types of film leader—which Conner assembled, condensed, and then spliced together into a rapid-fire, densely-packed twelve-minute montage. A MOVIE’s faded black-and-white 16mm stock gives it a dated look to both contemporary audiences and to viewers fifty years ago, since many of the events shown on

screen occurred at least a decade prior to the film's making. There is no dialogue or voiceover, just an orchestral soundtrack, Ottorino Respighi's 1924 "Pines of Rome," which lends dramatic intensity to the dizzying array of images, but also a shade of irony, and a dash of kitsch.

Conner edited the "girl and a bomb" sequence to mimic the conventional progress of an erotic encounter: beginning with arousal (the peeping tom spies his target), leading to penetration (the missile launch), and finally, climaxing in a watery eruption (the mushroom cloud). The scene parodies clichéd Hollywood storylines where sex (or, in accordance with the Hays Code and conventional mores, marriage) death, or some symbolic combination of the two, lay the groundwork for narrative resolution. Yet, in *A MOVIE*, there is no resolution; the climactic explosion doesn't end the world or the film, rather, it is just one more catastrophe in the stream of calamities, chases, crashes, and collapses that Conner masterfully orchestrates.

To fully understand the "girl and the bomb" scene, to get the joke, so to speak, is to recognize it as a concise visual analogy between female sexuality and apocalyptic destruction. At once ominous and playful, suggestive and explicit, Conner's image-analogy exemplifies the dominant cultural anxieties of the Cold War, a period when female social and economic empowerment, including their sexual liberation, were linked visually and discursively to the mortal threat posed by the atomic bomb. However critical of mainstream cultural mores and Hollywood conventions, *A MOVIE* still trafficks in standard Cold War tropes, specifically through its visual linking of the atomic bomb with images of the eroticized female body.

This chapter will examine the ways that Conner navigated the Cold War cultural imaginary in his first two films, *A MOVIE* (1958) and *COSMIC RAY* (1961), by focusing on how these works engaged the dominant visual culture and cultural politics of that period. Throughout, I consider Conner's critical deployment of Cold War cultural discourse—ranging

had a profound impact on Conner's life and work, especially his films. After WWII, the city grew to become the largest in the state, mainly due to its role as a hub for military aviation manufacturing. Known as the "Air Capital of the World," Wichita is home to both McConnell Airforce Base and the headquarters of the Boeing Military Airplane Company.²⁶ At the height of wartime production, it is estimated that an average of 4.2 bomber aircraft were built in Wichita each day. Besides its association with the military aircraft industry, Kansas also plays an important role in American cultural mythology as the geographic center of the U.S. and birthplace of many fictional protagonists, including Dorothy, the ruby-slippered heroine of Frank L. Baum's *Oz* series, and Clark Kent, the Kryptonian orphan-refugee and bespectacled superhero. Before Conner, Wichita's best-known native son was the cartoon mischief-maker, Dennis the Menace, who first appeared in print in 1951. Kansas's role as the "heartland" of America and setting for wholesome popular fiction speaks to its significance within the national mythology—exemplifying all that is "smalltown America" and "the American Dream." Yet, for outcast native sons like Conner, Wichita was a "vortex," situated at the eye of the tornado of Cold War containment ideology.²⁷

²⁶ Craig Miner, Professor of History at Wichita State University, writes: "Driven by defense spending during the war years, Wichita's economy increased and its population doubled, from 100,000 to roughly 200,000...It was a time of hysteric growth." Quoted in "Against the Grain," C.K. White, *The Shocker*. In January 2012, Boeing announced plans to shut down their Wichita factories in the face of Pentagon budget cuts. Nevertheless, Wichita remains a major manufacturing center for the aircraft industry, with companies like Beechcraft, Bombardier, Cessna, and Airbus all having major manufacturing centers within the city. See "Boeing Departure Shakes Wichita's Identity as Airplane Capital," *The New York Times* (18 January 2012).

²⁷ "Containment ideology" is a term developed by American cultural historians to refer to a wide range of Cold War-era political and social discourses mainly relating to anti-communism but also encompassing race, gender, and sexual politics. The term "containment" is derived from the diplomatic strategy proposed by George Kennan in 1947, which outlines the Truman administration's official policy on curtailing the spread of Communism abroad and also weeding out potential internal threats on the domestic front. Two major texts on containment culture are Elaine Tyler May, "Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb," in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (Basic Books, 1988), 89–108, and Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Duke University Press, 1995).

As a non-conforming adolescent, Conner sought refuge and inspiration in Wichita's many movie theaters, many of which were managed by his uncle, H.F. "Buddy" Brown, who often employed Conner during the summers. When asked in 1986 about his major influences, Conner remarked, "My influences are mostly in Wichita, Kansas. Hanging out in the Orpheum Theater and the Miller Theater," where he would spend afternoons watching the latest Hollywood features, interspersed with newsreels, cartoons, and short serials.²⁸ However, the theater did not provide an escape from the all-pervasive paranoia of the Cold War. For instance, in February 1952, when Conner would have been a freshman at Wichita University, The Orpheum Theater conducted a photo-op to promote the new Cold War thriller, *Invasion U.S.A* (Alfred E. Green, 1952), which makes extensive use of military-themed stock footage in its tale of an apocalyptic confrontation between the U.S. and an unidentified "enemy" nation, clearly coded as the Soviet Union. In the photo, theater employees smile cheerfully while donning atomic fallout preparedness helmets and suits and pose in front of an air raid siren installed in the theater lobby, with a civil defense sign behind them declaring "Wake up Wichita! Before it is too late!" (fig. 1.3).

As an adult, Conner regarded Kansas as a cultural vacuum where he had enjoyed limited access to art and felt like a social outcast, as he has stated, "When I was in Wichita there were not very many people that I could relate to. At the time if you read a book you were a creep and a queer. Generally someone that nobody wanted to relate to."²⁹ However, in the postwar years Wichita had grown large enough to accommodate its own homegrown avant-garde: the "Wichita Vortex," also known as the Kansas Beats. This loose-knit group of young artists, poets, and

²⁸ See Chuck Hudina, "Bruce Conner: Visitor in the World," *Release Print*, March 1986.

²⁹ Paul Cummings, Oral history interview with Bruce Conner, April 16, 1973, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/conner73.htm>.

bohemians, many of whom attended Wichita University in the early 1950s, included Conner, Michael McClure, Lee Streiff, Dave Haselwood, and others. Much of the “Vortex” circle would later move west to San Francisco, including Conner, McClure, Haselwood, Robert Branaman, and his wife, Beth Pewther, who appears in Conner’s second film, *COSMIC RAY* (1961).³⁰

According to Conner, the myth of the “Vortex” originally evolved in the early 1950s, and featured a science-fiction plot that he described in 1987 to the Department of Special Collections at the University of Kansas:

The VORTEX myth was based on the concept that we (Eric Ecklor, Loren Frickel, Lee Streiff, Bruce Conner, Jack Morrison, Michael McClure in specific and the residents of Wichita in general) were held captive as outlaws of another planet. We were deposited annually in Wichita and endowed with fabricated memories at the time of the WU Homecoming game. WE could never leave Wichita. All outside of Wichita was an illusion of the VORTEX. No matter how hard one might try, the Vortex would snap you back to Wichita where we were eternally trapped. I first heard this comic myth from McClure, Morrison and Ecklor. It was elaborated into great detail over the next couple of years and was referred to when many of us had moved to San Francisco.... somehow we had not really eluded the force of the VORTEX and we were in actual fact deceived by mind altering rays from the enemy from outer space.³¹

With a cheeky nod to the famous Kansan fable, Conner ends the letter: “As Dorothy said— That’s the Vortex in Toto.”

In 1966, Allen Ginsberg embarked on a cross-country road trip to discover the “Vortex” for himself, noting that he wanted to discover where his friends Conner and McClure came from (fig. 1.4). During the trip, Ginsberg composed a poem, *Wichita Vortex Sutra*, which begins in “The Biggest Little Town in Kansas, MacPherson [sic],” Conner’s birthplace, and proceeds to

³⁰ Robert Branaman collaborated frequently with Conner on films; he contributed the San Francisco street scenes seen in *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*, and Conner reportedly contributed to Branaman’s *Wichita Film* (1960), which is no longer extant. See Chapter Two for more on Branaman’s involvement in *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*. Branaman and his wife Beth Pewther arrived in San Francisco from Wichita in 1959, two years after Bruce and Jean Conner.

³¹ Bruce Conner, “Letter to Robert W. Melton,” November 1, 1987, Folder 36, Carton 2, The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

survey the flat landscape and small towns with a mixture of frustration, rage, and disgust. In startlingly graphic language, Ginsberg imagines the global consequences of American conservative values, moral superiority, sexual repression, and its uncritical embrace of the military industrial complex—including the U.S.’s violent intervention in Vietnam. To expose this dense web of hypocrisy, the outraged poet poses a set of rhetorical questions:

Is this the land that started war on China?
This be the soil that thought Cold War for decades?
Are these nervous naked trees & farmhouses
the vortex
of oriental anxiety molecules
that’ve imagined American Foreign Policy
and magick’d up paranoia in Peking
and curtains of living blood
surrounding far Saigon?

Enraged and despairing, Ginsberg evaluates the heartland scenery through the window of his automobile, juxtaposing his observations with overheard snippets of radio news coverage of the Vietnam War—a poetic audiovisual montage that recalls the techniques of avant-garde cinema, and particularly, Conner’s films.

Ginsberg’s critique of American life harnesses the shock value of graphic juxtapositions in a way that recalls the montage of disasters and travesties in *A MOVIE*. Just like Conner’s film, *Wichita Vortex Sutra* proceeds like a grotesque comic book or animated cartoon, revealing modernity’s myth of social progress as a farce while it (anti)narrates the decline of civilization, line-by-line, frame-by-frame, cel-by-cel. Conner himself remarked upon *A MOVIE*’s off-putting seriality and incongruous juxtapositions as symptomatic of the “comic book time” of mass media spectacle:

My films are no different than what I experience. I mean, that’s the real world. It’s not a fantasy; it’s not a found object environment. This is the stuff I see as the phenomena around me. That’s what I call the real world. If you listen to a news program on the radio there will be maybe ten events in a row. It’s no different than *A MOVIE*: it’s something

totally absurd and ridiculous, next to a world wide catastrophe, next to speculation, next to a kind of instruction about how you're supposed to think about some political event. [...] Ga-ga, ga-ga! I mean, this is comic book time!³²

Oscillating from the tragic to the cartoonish, both *Wichita Vortex Sutra* and *A MOVIE* present a damning vision of modern America drained of ethics, meaning, and reason. It is not coincidental that both works are products of their authors' encounters with the cultural paradoxes of Cold War America embodied by the *Wichita Vortex*.

Interviewed in the *Wichita Eagle* during his brief stay in the city, Ginsberg named Conner, McClure, and Stan Brakhage as some of the many artists who once lived in Wichita but fled its stultifying cultural prejudices, social conformity, and repressive atmosphere. Ginsberg noted that many of these artists fled to San Francisco, a postwar countercultural mecca for social outcasts, bohemians, artists and intellectuals. Still, he insisted that these artists owed much of their talent to growing up in Wichita, and that their talents emerged "not so much in spite of repression, but because of it. The artists fought back, rebelled, broke through the hostility. They learned in Wichita; they became productive away from Wichita."³³ Ginsberg's ruminations are especially applicable to Conner, an iconoclastic Kansan who fled the *Vortex* for San Francisco, and a life as an artist in the Emerald City by the bay.

Not in Kansas Anymore: Ratbastard Among the Beats

After leaving Wichita in 1952, Conner attended a number of different universities and art schools, less out of a desire for higher education than in an attempt to avoid military service and

³² Conner, quoted in an interview with film scholar William Wees, conducted July 1991 and reprinted in William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993), 103.

³³ Robert Whereatt, "Poet Says City Trains, Then Stifles Its Talent," *Wichita Eagle*, February 6, 1966.

to continue receiving financial support from his family.³⁴ From 1952-1956, Conner studied at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, where he met his future wife, Jean Sandstedt, and earned his B.F.A. in 1956. The summer after graduating, Conner made his first visit to San Francisco to visit Michael McClure and his wife, Joanna—a trip that would lay the groundwork for his subsequent move to San Francisco the following year. Conner spent part of 1956 in New York City, where he studied painting at the Brooklyn Museum Art School and began a relationship with Charles Alan Gallery, which represented him for over a decade. In 1957, Conner joined Sandstedt in Boulder, Colorado, where she was completing an MFA at the University of Colorado. While living in Boulder and taking art classes at the University, Conner began a life-long friendship with experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage, who nurtured Conner's love of cinema and his burgeoning interest in making his own films. Brakhage, Conner, Sandstedt and other CU-Boulder students convened a small group of cinema enthusiasts to begin a film society, the Experimental Cinema Group, which grew to over three hundred members and continued to operate on campus for over three decades.³⁵ Brakhage also put Conner in touch with San Francisco filmmaker Larry Jordan, with whom Brakhage had attended high school in Denver in

³⁴ In 1973, Conner recalled: "Going to college kept you out of the Army. While going to college, my father would support me. So I had to fulfill all the obligations of going to college and taking classes I did not want to take, whether they were art classes, or speech classes, or whatever it was. I had no idea how to make a living. If you went to art school you were not deferred. I had a tremendous horror of going into the Army. That is probably why I went to college for so long." See Paul Cummings, Oral history interview with Bruce Conner, April 16, 1973, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Later, in a 1997 conversation with curator Bruce Jenkins, Conner stated: "I received a draft notice just about the time that I was working I managed to get a 4F and was able, over a period of time, to be deferred from going through that process. In the midst of this madness, I could see that my enemy was not some person on the other side of the world who I did not know, but immediately the person who was threatening me and forcing me to do things which I thought would be reprehensible, unethical, immoral, generally evil. I am not a tremendous supporter of the military industrial complex, and I was not such a supporter in the 1950s, well before I made A MOVIE." Bruce Jenkins, Bruce Conner in Telephone Conversation with Bruce Jenkins of the Walker Art Center Film/Video Department, February 26, 1997, Carton 16, Folder 1, The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

³⁵ Conner recalls a membership of three hundred and fifty, and screenings of classic films like Buster Keaton's *The General*, Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel's *An Andalusian Dog*, and Brakhage's early work. See Nancy Richards, Unpublished Interview with Bruce Conner, October 6, 1984, Carton 15, Folder 38, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 24.

the late 1940s. In the course of their correspondence, Conner and Jordan made plans to start an experimental film society. Conner's westward migration was finally set in motion.³⁶

Bruce and Jean Conner were married in Boulder on September 1, 1957, and that same day, boarded a plane to San Francisco, where they were picked up by Larry Jordan and settled in with the McClures' at 2322 Fillmore Street until renting an apartment at 2361 Jackson Street. The newlyweds quickly became part of a tight-knit circle of visual artists and poets that included other artist-couples like the McClures, Jay DeFeo and Wally Hedrick, Joan Brown and Manuel Neri, Jess Collins and Robert Duncan, and Wallace and Shirley Berman. Conner christened his group of friends the "Rat Bastard Protective Association," a phrase that combined the initials of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with the name of a local union of garbage collectors, who called themselves the Scavengers Protective Association. During this period, Conner primarily worked on three-dimensional collage sculptures, or "assemblages," and soon emerged as a central figure in the postwar California assemblage movement alongside artists such as George Herms, Wallace Berman, and Ed Kienholz. Conner's macabre works, which he also called "rat bastards," were constructed from discarded and secondhand objects, and typically exhibit psychologically disturbing, violent and erotic imagery. His signature gesture was to wrap his works in torn nylon stockings, which earned him the dubious distinction of "the nylon-stockings artist."

As Rebecca Solnit describes in her book *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era*, Conner rejected the art historical genealogy that mainstream critics and curators imposed on assemblage, which traced the origins of this hybrid medium back to historical, predominately European avant-garde movements like Dada, Surrealism, and Cubism, and linked

³⁶ For more on Jordan's relationship with Conner, see Paul Karlstrom, Oral History Interview with Larry Jordan, July 30, 1996, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-larry-jordan-12216>.

it to contemporary New York-based artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns.³⁷ Instead, Conner constructed his own idiosyncratic artistic genealogy, citing the influence of his West Coast artist contemporaries, especially his (notably both female) painter friends, DeFeo and Brown; the junk shops and abandoned Victorian buildings of his San Francisco neighborhood, the Fillmore, a historically African-American section of the city; and the Scavengers Protective Association, whose practice of tying bags of trash to the sides of their truck inspired Conner to make hanging works constructed from scraps and detritus. Conner's tendency to exalt marginalized materials and reject elite artistic lineages carried over into his filmmaking practice, particularly through his use of found footage and his repeat references to "coming attractions," movie trailers, and vintage slapstick comedies and cartoons as sources of inspiration rather than historical avant-garde film or European art cinema.

As soon as Conner landed in San Francisco, he and Larry Jordan followed through on their plans to establish a film society by starting a short-lived organization called Camera Obscura. Conner assisted Jordan in converting a North Beach storefront into a small black box theater, but was immediately injured on the job, spraining his ankle while moving theater seats. Beyond these logistical setbacks, the two men also clashed over programming—ever mischievous, Conner planned to show snippets of "girlie movies," and other varieties of forbidden footage like countdown leader during screenings of classic European films, in a kind of teasing, Dada-esque gesture of defiance of high-brow seriousness and of the codes of

³⁷ For more on this tight-knit social group of artists, see Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1990).

“censorship” that he identified with conventional cinematic spectatorship.³⁸ Conner recounted his plans as follows:

So we'd be showing something like [Renoir's] *Rules of the Game* and you'd see this number count to five and you'd see this naked lady and the naked lady would disappear and there would be more numbers and everybody'd sort of do a double-take, and I wanted to find whether anybody would actually say that they'd seen it...sort of like this accidental thing. Oop! Surprise. I'm sorry...I finally picked out a film that I wanted at Camera Obscura, and I told Larry what I wanted to do and he became outraged and offended. He said [...] if I did that, he was going to quit, he wasn't going to have anything to do with this film society. So then I decided, 'I'm not going to be able to do this here...but I can do it in my own movie.'³⁹

Somewhat ironically, Jordan's rejection prompted Conner to imagine a film comprised entirely of such “censored” materials. After Jordan gave Conner a brief tutorial in film editing and permission to use his editing equipment for two weeks, including a Griswold wet splicer and his studio, Conner produced his first film out of the same materials that Jordan had refused to let him show.⁴⁰ Besides its titles, *A MOVIE* is a “camera-less” film, made primarily out of pre-existing, or “found” footage, a material rife with creative possibilities and a rich history.

³⁸ Conner's plans to show the “girlie” footage during a screening of Leni Riefenstahl's fascist masterpiece, *Triumph of the Will* (1935) is discussed in Warren Bass, “The Past Restructured: Bruce Conner and Others,” *Journal of the University Film Association*, no. 33 (1981): 15–22.

³⁹ Conner, Unpublished interview with Nancy Richards, 22 April 1985, Tape One, Page 26–27. Carton 15, Folder 38, BANC MSS 2000/50c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Elsewhere, Conner stated: *A Movie* [sic] was started out of that idea of sticking all those pieces of film together—plus I had a strip of film, which is in the movie, of the girl who is sitting down taking off her stocking (which I had found ten years before when I was about 17; I was at somebody's house and we were looking for something and we found that strip of film in a dresser). When I was running film societies I would think about this leader coming through and how funny it would be to have this stuck in the middle of it...I ran a film society in San Francisco...with Larry Jordan, and I wanted to splice that leader onto some movie Larry was just terribly offended with the idea and wouldn't let me do it. So I decided to make *A Movie* [sic].” See Robert A. Haller, “Excerpts From An Interview With Bruce Conner Conducted In July Of 1971,” 192.

⁴⁰ Conner describes Jordan's equipment in his unpublished interview with Richards, 27.

A Condensed History and Morphology of Found Footage Film

Two decades before Conner made *A MOVIE*, the American surrealist artist Joseph Cornell made *Rose Hobart*, a campy, yet heartfelt, tribute to one of his B-movie idols. Cornell extracted Hobart's scenes from *East of Borneo* (George Melford, 1931), interspersed them with footage of a lunar eclipse, and added a found soundtrack of kitschy Brazilian music. When he first showed the film, Cornell projected it through a blue-tinted lens to give it a romantic, melancholic aura. While Conner's use of discarded, anonymous stock footage distinguishes *A MOVIE* from Cornell's obsessive distillation of a single, feature-length Hollywood film, the two artists are often considered as dual progenitors of the found footage genre within the history of experimental cinema.

The use of recycled footage in a sustained, intentional manner can be traced even further back in film history to the compilation films of Soviet filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov and Esfir Shub, whose epic propaganda films pioneered experimental methods of film montage.⁴¹ During the 1910s, Kuleshov began analyzing how the simple re-arrangement of shots can provoke a wide range of emotional reactions in film audiences; the theory he developed out of these experiments became known as "the Kuleshov effect." In an interview with artist Doug Aitken, Conner offered his own interpretation of this effect, stating, "Just by putting images together, relationships between things are suggested, whether they exist in real life or not. If you

⁴¹ Shub's *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) is pseudo-documentary that recycles footage shot during the Czarist regime as a basis for critiquing the harsh socio-economic inequalities of the pre-Revolution period. For more on the history of the "compilation film," from Soviet propaganda films to documentary, see Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films: A Study of the Compilation Film* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964).

run three images together in sequence, people are going to draw a conclusion between them, and I wanted to play with this.”⁴²

Conner could not have anticipated the degree to which found footage is a ubiquitous presence in today’s media landscape, from news programs to music videos to YouTube mash-ups, where appropriated moving-images rarely serve a critical purpose. To write a history of found footage film today would require a consideration of a wide range of legal, aesthetic, and political issues, from copyright, creative commons, and artistic appropriation, to the problems and paradoxes of digitization, activist movements like culture jamming, fan subcultures, and the widespread practice of “remixing.”⁴³ However popular and ubiquitous found footage has become, it remains an under-theorized field with a limited bibliography and amorphous definition; following from the famously subjective legal definition of pornography, “you know it when you see it.”

Generally speaking, “found footage” refers to appropriated and recycled film footage that is incorporated into a new cinematic work, and thus a “found footage film” denotes a cinematic work that is comprised, in full or in part, of pre-existing film material that was originally produced for an entirely different context. Extant film material can be drawn from a wide variety of sources, including stock footage, newsreels, documentaries, propaganda films, pornographic films, travel and ethnographic films, home movies, Hollywood trailers and features, television programs, advertisements, animation, cartoons, industrials, and educational films produced for schools and vocational or military training. Such footage might be “found” in a warehouse, an

⁴² Conner, quoted in Doug Aitken, “Interview with Bruce Conner,” in *Broken Screen: 26 Conversations with Doug Aitken: Expanding the Image, Breaking the Narrative*, ed. Noel Daniel (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2006), 86–96.

⁴³ See the recent collection of essays, *Cutting Across Media: Appropriation Art, Interventionist Collage, and Copyright Law*, Kembrew McLeod and Rudolf Kuenzli, eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

archive, a flea market, or a dumpster; it could be forgotten personal property, outmoded popular entertainment, or discarded industrial surplus; it could be accidentally discovered, or meticulously researched and sought out; it could be struck from an original negative, reshot from a screen or monitor. In short, “found footage film” is a capacious category that describes an enormous range of materials and methods.

Once “readymade” film material is severed from its initial source and function, its signification becomes fundamentally destabilized. Filmmakers that employ found footage often exploit this semiotic instability by juxtaposing disparate images or allowing the origins of their source material to remain ambiguous and often, completely anonymous. As a consequence of working with extant film material, the filmmaker’s role is typically confined to post-production processes and strategies, such as editing, re-photography, hand-tinting or physical modification of the celluloid, and manipulation of the soundtrack. Therefore, while it might seem that the “author function” (i.e. individual creative control and expression) is drastically diminished in found footage films, the filmmaker can, in fact, intervene, manipulate, and transform the selected material in multifarious ways, resulting in a seemingly limitless range of variations.

According to film scholar William Wees, arguably the leading expert on the genre, found footage films can “range from loose strings of comic metaphors and analogies, to off-beat narratives, to surreal visual poems, to formal experiments in graphic and rhythmic relationships, to critiques of the media’s visual codes and the myths and ideologies that sustain them.”⁴⁴ While Conner’s films could actually accommodate each of these characterizations, other practitioners had a more narrowly political agenda in adopting found footage as a strategy. For instance, the French intellectual Guy Debord, a central figure of the Lettrists and later, the Situationist

⁴⁴ Wees, 12.

International, began producing found footage films as a method of *détournement*, a term he invented to describe the subversive appropriation of mass media spectacle for the purposes of radical political critique.⁴⁵ Noting the prominent role of found footage in the critical avant-garde tradition, Paul Arthur notes “found footage collage has become not simply a preeminent trope in the expression of historical consciousness, it has emerged as the very emblem of a postmodern materiality—the photographic as always and inevitably second-hand, a re-contextualization.”⁴⁶

The common denominator that binds “found footage film” as a category is the act of appropriation that initiates the creative process. Put simply, once found footage is severed from its “original” context, new (or latent) meanings can be potentially activated. Film’s traditional capacity as a visual record, i.e. its supposedly indexical function, carries with it an evidentiary function that is both magnified and rendered ambiguous by the passage of time. As a result, found footage can refer at once to *specific* historical events and to the very existence of the past, to the idea of history itself. Even if the pro-filmic event captured on film is believed to be fictional or staged, the continued existence of its photographic trace serves to confirm that event’s historical existence, and implicitly, validates its historical significance. It is exactly these qualities—an evidentiary status, commemorative function, and the aura of historicity—that endow found footage with its mixed sense of historical specificity and universality, its

⁴⁵ Prominent sub-genres of found footage film include ironic or satirical faux-documentaries like Kevin Rafferty, Pierce Rafferty and Jayne Loader’s *The Atomic Café* (1982), and Craig Baldwin’s *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies in America*; poetic paeans to faded or forgotten stars like Joseph Cornell’s *Rose Hobart* (1936); critiques of mass media representation and characteristically structural examinations of the material conditions of the film medium, such as Ken Jacobs’s *Tom, Tom, the Piper’s Son* (1969-71); critiques of mass media spectacle such as Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley’s *Schmeerguntz* (1965), or the Situationist *détournement* films of Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem; or works that draw upon found footage’s status as an historical artifact to play with the aesthetics of ruin and decay, such as Bill Morrison’s *Decasia* (2002), Peggy Ahwesh’s *The Color of Love* (1994), and Conner’s own *MARILYN TIMES FIVE* (1968-1973). Found footage has proven particularly popular among Austrian experimental filmmakers, including Gustav Deutsch, Peter Tscherasaky, Martin Arnold, Elke Groen, Christoph Weirich, Norbert Pfaffenbichler, Georg Wasner, and Thomas Draschan.

⁴⁶ Paul Arthur, “The Status of Found Footage,” *Spectator: The University of Southern California Journal of Film and Television* 20, no. 1 (Fall -Winter 2000 1999): 57.

paradoxical combination of truth, enigma and possibility. Moreover, it is precisely these possibilities and paradoxes that A MOVIE puts into play.

A MOVIE as Meta-Movie

Conner's first attempt at filmmaking is best understood as a heady combination of life-long cinephilia, childhood nostalgia, and economic necessity. When he began working on A MOVIE in late 1957, Conner held a job as an usher at the Warwick Theater, while Jean Conner worked across the street selling hot dogs at a concession stand in the United Artists movie theater; in short, the Conners were poor.⁴⁷ Often referring to A MOVIE as a "poverty film," Conner recalled how he quickly realized that while he could not afford a camera, new film stock, professional processing and printing on his practically minimum-wage salary, what he could afford were used, condensed reels of random footage from the camera store's discount bin, secondhand stores, or best of all, the dumpster.⁴⁸

The content of Conner's "poverty film" was inspired by the movie going of his childhood and adolescence:

I started fabricating a movie in my mind in the early fifties; it would have scenes from King Kong and Marlene Dietrich movies, all sorts of things, combined with soundtracks. It was just a fantasy. When I started making movies, I found out how difficult it was to get your hands on anything like that, how expensive it turns out to be. So I gathered a lot

⁴⁷ "Biographical Information: Bruce Conner: 1933 -1957, 8/20/2000," Carton 13, Folder 19, MSS 2000/50c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁴⁸ Conner states, "I made my first movie the way I did because of economics. I wanted to make a movie and I couldn't afford a movie camera." See MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema: Interviews With Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 234. He continues, "...the economics of it was that I could buy a 16mm hundred-foot silent condensation of a Hopalong Cassidy movie, about two-and-a-half minutes long, for \$3.00. If I shot that much film and had it processed and printed, it would cost \$12.00 or \$13.00. I bought condensations of films that I knew had action. Of course, that something was condensed down to one hundred feet meant it had all the most visual material in the first place." Quoted in McDonald, 254.

of the movies that were sold at a local film supply store. I had no idea then that A MOVIE was going to turn out the way it did.⁴⁹

Elsewhere, Conner recalled seeing his first film at age five, when his mother took him to local movie theatre to see a new Shirley Temple feature, “She was twenty-five feet tall and the most terrifying thing I had ever seen.”⁵⁰ This anecdote functions like the primal scene of Conner’s cinephilia, and points to its strongly gendered dynamic, in which cinematic visual pleasure is embodied in the grotesque feminine caricature of a gigantic child actress—a terrifying vision of sublime proportions. As Conner matured, this gendered cinephilia extended to “girlie movies” and “stag films,” the kind of soft-core pornographic films that Jordan forbade him from surreptitiously inserting into Camera Obscura programs. Conner discovered one of the “girlie movies” used in A MOVIE as a seventeen-year-old in Wichita, while visiting the home of his friend, Lee Streiff. After rifling through his older brother’s dresser drawers, Streiff made the surprising discovery of “a little strip of 16mm, of an almost nude woman taking off her stockings.”⁵¹ Streiff offered the film to Conner, and the artifact was later integrated into A MOVIE, where it ignites the first wave of shocks that recur throughout the film.

Though the title of A MOVIE is deliberately generic and vague, it nevertheless offers an accurate assessment of the film’s approach to the visual rhetoric of “the movies,” and specifically, classical narrative cinema. Through his virtuosic editing of secondhand, discarded film material, Conner constructed “a movie” that caricatures mainstream movies, especially Hollywood film—but at the same time, it is, in his words, “an anti-movie,” a critical negation of

⁴⁹ Ibid, 254.

⁵⁰ Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1990), 59.

⁵¹ Richards, Unpublished Interview with Bruce Conner, 26.

Hollywood's formulaic narrative and formal conventions.⁵² More than just a pastiche of clichéd cinematic codes, *A MOVIE* offers a self-reflexive critique of cinema that exerts pressure on the very notion of medium-specificity, a hallmark of artistic modernism. In this sense, *A MOVIE* poses a challenge to the dominant formalist interpretations of postwar American avant-garde film, particularly the avant-garde's approach to its medium and to the broader field of industrially produced cinema.

A MOVIE opens with the name BRUCE CONNER, which lingers in the frame for over thirty seconds, in a satirical nod to the *auteur* status traditionally accorded the film director. The name disappears in a flash of academy leader, and is followed by the title "A MOVIE," again identified as, "By Bruce Conner." Periodically, these credits return, redundantly announcing "A MOVIE by Bruce Conner"; these seemingly arbitrary disruptions truncate the film into stops-and-starts and permanently postpone any semblance of linear narrative or continuity (fig. 1.5-1.6). Following from these disorienting opening credits, there is a flood of flickering shapes and marks, including round perforations in the celluloid that are typically used to indicate the end of a 16mm reel to the projectionist, but are not supposed to be revealed to the audience (fig. 1.7). Next, one can faintly discern another false cue, "End of Part Four" (fig. 1.8) as it flashes by, followed by a sequence of countdown leader, which sets the stage for the coveted "girlie movie," in which a woman is shown seated in profile as she slowly removes her stockings (fig. 1.9). This sudden irruption of sex is quickly cut short by another bogus declaration of "The End," but immediately afterwards, the real "action" finally gets underway.

For the bewildering montage that makes up the rest of *A MOVIE*, Conner chose scenes ranging from the anonymous to the iconic: beginning with stampeding horse-drawn buggies from

⁵² Conner refers to *A MOVIE* as "an anti-movie," in interview with Richards, 28.

the popular Western serial “Hopalong Cassidy,” followed by bare-chested indigenous women balancing jugs of water atop their heads, a pair of tightrope walkers teetering against a skyscraper landscape, and heaps of dead soldiers, interspersed with more historically specific, “newsworthy” clips: Teddy Roosevelt giving a speech (fig. 1.10), the Hindenburg before it burst into flames (fig. 1.11), the Tacoma bridge collapse of 1940, and, most strikingly, an aerial shot of the 1946 underwater atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll: the climactic result of the “peeping-tom” compressed-narrative described at the beginning of this chapter. As these spectacles, stunts, crashes and catastrophes accrue on screen, their dramatic impact gradually wanes, and they begin to acquire an absurd tone that is further amplified by the epic strains of Respighi’s score. Bombarded with this onslaught of de-contextualized imagery, the viewer inevitably struggles to impose order and meaning on these floating chains of signifiers. As if to acknowledge the free-floating, unmoored quality of the film’s narrative arc, the final images Conner shows are of a pair of deep-sea divers investigating a sunken ship. While the hidden treasure remains elusive, a glimmer of sunlight on the water’s surface indicates the possibility of a “happy ending,” though no guarantee.

Somewhat ironically, the most commonly referenced and thus most “memorable” scene from *A MOVIE* is the interaction between the submarine officer and the bikini-clad woman, which results in an orgasmic missile launch. Though this scene comes closest to approximating a traditional cause-and-effect storyline, but only in so far as to lampoon the formulaic conventions of Hollywood narrative. Despite the disruptive nature of narrative in *A MOVIE* and his other films, Conner still considered his films as narrative-based, often remarking: “My narrative involves the narrative of dreams.”⁵³ This statement suggests that Conner was influenced by

⁵³ Conner, quoted in Michael Kilgore, “Bruce Conner’s Dream-Like Films,” *Tampa Tribune*, May 27, 1979, ID.

surrealism, a dominant tradition within avant-garde filmmaking both in Europe and the U. S. Conner openly admired the uncanny, oneiric sensibilities of surrealist-inspired cinema, like that of Luis Buñuel and Maya Deren. His efforts throughout 1957-1958 to organize experimental film societies in Boulder and San Francisco speaks to his determination to become familiar with the history of avant-garde cinema, and furthermore, speaks to his cinematic interests and tastes in the period immediately before he decided to make *A MOVIE*.

And yet, when Conner was asked why he became a filmmaker, he emphasized his childhood obsession with “the movies” as a driving force. Conner’s emphasis on his adolescent love of movies over the influence of the historical avant-garde cinema suggests that his understanding of a “narrative of dreams” had less to do with the Surrealist’s psychic automatism than with the dreams and fantasies of childhood.⁵⁴ Thus, rather than canonical avant-garde cinema, Conner’s touchstones were industrial cinema’s commercial products. Frequently, Conner traced his concept for *A MOVIE* back to the clichéd procedures of the Hollywood movie trailer and “coming attractions.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ In multiple interviews, Conner recalled how his desire to make *A MOVIE* stemmed from his early love of classical Hollywood as a young boy back in Wichita. For instance, in 1985: “I’d started working on *A MOVIE* when I was 15 years old, and I knew absolutely nothing at that time about experimental films. I’d seen in about 1945 or 1946, Hollywood films that had psychoanalytic structures. They had psychiatrists, they had dream sequences, and you know, you’d see this whirlpool of water on the screen or on top of somebody’s head, and then you’d know you were watching a dream [...] I was [...] going to movies perpetually, fascinated with them. I began to discover that there were these type of films that were made during the forties, the thirties and forties that I’d seen, really stopped happened in the fifties, when Hollywood films became this bland nonentity. And I started searching out films at that time, in the mid-1950’s. I started films societies...I was trying to find out what had happened to these movies.” Conner, unpublished interview with Nancy Richards (April 22, 1985), pg. 22, Box 15, Folder 38, The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁵⁵ Conner states: “Also, I saw *Coming Attractions* at theaters, which are similar to the way in which I make my movies. *Coming Attractions* trailers like many other kinds of popular forms that aren’t considered art, allow so much room to do unexpected things because nobody considers it serious. It was only supposed to a certain thing, like promote a movie, but at the same time it allows subconscious or intuitive relationships to come out. Ones which aren’t part of language and aren’t part of acknowledged social heavier. So I would see a *Coming Attraction*, Barbara Stanwyck yelling at this man, saying “I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.” SLAP! Slap him across the face and the next shot would be a train going off a cliff, or off a trestle, and the next shot would be somebody shooting a gun and it seemed to me just wonderful.” See Richards, 28.

[...] ‘coming attractions’ influenced me. It seemed so extreme that people would accept them on their own terms mainly because they were throwaways, unimportant. If you take the point of view that ‘coming attractions’ are not a throwaway, that they are intended to be seen exactly the way they are, you find there's an emotional purpose and context to the way they're made. There might be a scene of Barbara Stanwyck yelling at a man, ‘I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!’ and she'd slap him, and the next shot would be a train going off a cliff. You'd see that kind of combination of images every week at the movie theater. So to me it seemed perfectly natural.⁵⁶

Besides “Coming Attractions,” the other major influence on *A MOVIE* according to Conner was the fantastical slapstick of the Marx Brothers’ *Duck Soup* (Leo McCarey, 1933), which includes a rapid montage of stock footage featuring stampeding elephants, fire trucks, and sporting races that is strikingly similar to the imagery seen in *A MOVIE*.⁵⁷

Another inspiration behind *A MOVIE*’s disparate montage was the job that Conner held while he was making *A MOVIE*, as a movie theater usher. Although the job was low-paid, it had the benefit of allowing Conner to watch fragments of different movies throughout the workday.⁵⁸ A similar mode of aleatory, spontaneous, and repetitive cinematic spectatorship was practiced by the young Surrealist André Breton, who, in a much-cited 1951 essay “Comme dans un bois,” describes how he and his friend Jacques Vaché would theatre-hop indiscriminately while stationed in Nantes during World War One. Their overarching goal was to experience a disorienting collage of film narratives that would activate unconscious desires—like a waking

⁵⁶ MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema*, 254.

⁵⁷ Conner frequently cited seeing *Duck Soup* as a teenager as a major influence on *A MOVIE*. In an interview with Mia Culpa, Conner recalls, “All of a sudden, you see tanks and airplanes, soldiers, porpoises and marathon swimmers—everybody’s rushing to help [the Marx Brothers].” Mia Culpa, “Bruce Conner: Part Two,” *Damage* 1, No. 4 (January 1980), 7. In an interview with MacDonald: “*A Movie* [sic] started from seeing *Duck Soup*. There's a war going on, and the Marx brothers are surrounded in a farm house. Groucho says, 'We need help,' and all of a sudden you see soldiers and airplanes and dolphins and giraffes and everything else running to help them. I saw that movie when I was sixteen.” MacDonald. *A Critical Cinema*, 253.

⁵⁸ The notion of “theater” is a recurring theme in Conner’s work, particularly in his assemblages. The term “theater” appears frequently in interviews with Conner, particularly in his conversation with Paul Karlstrom, Oral History Interview with Bruce Conner, August 12, 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. The concept of “theater” and the “theatrical” in Conner’s assemblages is explored in depth by Kevin Hatch, “‘It Has to Do with the Theater’: Bruce Conner’s Ratbastards,” *October* 127 (Winter 2009), 109–132.

dream.⁵⁹ Breton's practice is often discussed in relation to the Surrealist emphasis on the oneiric, the unconscious, and the practice of automatism. Like Conner, the Surrealists preferred popular films—especially the slapstick comedy of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, along with cartoons and low-budget serials—to the deliberately artistic cinema of the French avant-garde. As Rudolf E. Kuenzli notes, “The film that Breton saw on a given Sunday was a montage that he himself made of sequences of several films which, probably because of the incongruous juxtapositions, charged him for a few days.”⁶⁰ In this sense, the young Surrealists' spontaneous montage practice anticipated the development of the found footage film genre that Conner later pioneered.

A MOVIE's exhaustive rehearsal and quotation of formulaic conventions clearly betrays a deep familiarity and fascination with its subject—the critique of cinema it offers is just as affectionate as it is incisive. In the words of film scholar David E. James, A MOVIE is “a representative example of the medium, a plenary instance that quotes all the essential components of a movie; but it is also a meta-movie, an anatomy of all previous movies that clarifies their method of operation.”⁶¹ Here, James pinpoints the intense self-reflexivity that characterizes A MOVIE's “anatomy” of Hollywood's aesthetic and ideological codes, including its formulaic narrative conventions, sensationalizing of sex and violence, and excessive investment in the director-as-star. For Conner, “the movies” is the chaotic sum of these component parts, which are undeniably inflected by historical, cultural, and economic

⁵⁹ Breton describes the practice in “Comme dans un bois,” *L'Age du cinéma*, no. 4-5 (August-November, 1951). See Rudolf E. Kuenzli, *Dada and Surrealist Film* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 8, op. cit. 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶¹ David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 156.

conditions — not to mention the subjective pleasures of cinematic experience that illuminate his childhood recollections.

In this sense, *A MOVIE* poses a challenge to dominant formalist interpretations of postwar American avant-garde film, where medium-specificity is traditionally framed as a radical stripping-down of external reference to uncover the medium's formal properties and "structural" essence. The term "structural film" was first coined by critic P. Adams Sitney in a landmark 1969 essay published in the journal *Film Culture*, in which Sitney heralded the emergence of a "cinema of structure" exemplified by a group of young filmmakers including Michael Snow, Tony Conrad, and Paul Sharits.⁶² It refers to the self-reflexive, and arguably, high modernist tendency amongst 1960s filmmakers who were concerned with the possibility of "pure film," or film distilled to its basic material essence. Sitney produces a taxonomy of stylistic and morphological characteristics that exemplify this "cinema of structure," including fixed camera position, flicker effects, loop printing, and re-photography off the screen. These traits do characterize many important "structural films" of the 1960s—for example, the fixed camera in Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), and the use of flicker in many of Sharits's films of this same period.

Summarizing Sitney's argument, James describes structural film as exhibiting a "determining reflexive concern with its own nature and its own signifying capabilities that also entails an implicit critique of illusionist narrative," or, put simply, films *about* film.⁶³ Within Sitney's evolutionary taxonomy of American avant-garde cinema, the emergence of the so-called

⁶² P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," *Film Culture* no. 47 (Summer 1969), 1–10, reprinted in P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 347–370. Also see Regina Cornwell, "Structural Film: Ten Years Later," *The Drama Review* 23, no. 3 (September 1979), 77–92, for more on the impact of Sitney's theories on avant-garde film discourse.

⁶³ James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 241.

“structural tendency” in the mid-1960s represented a significant development in the avant-garde’s pursuit of medium-specificity, the classic high modernist aim of form triumphing over content, finally adopted by avant-garde filmmakers. At the center of Sitney’s historical narrative is the contention that “the precise relationship of avant-garde cinema to American commercial film is one of radical otherness. They operate in different realms with next to no significant influence on each other.”⁶⁴ As influential as Sitney’s concept has been, his emphasis on modernist medium specificity has marginalized alternative avant-garde approaches to both the problem of film-as-medium, and to the broader field of industrially-produced commercial cinemas, particularly those practices that are equally concerned with the material properties of film, as with its historical, ideological, and cultural implications.⁶⁵

Conner’s strategic editing of found footage in *A MOVIE* calls attention to the formulaic qualities of Hollywood cinema and toys with the spectator’s expectations of narrative continuity. He achieves this, in part, through a sometimes playful, but often more sinister, juxtaposition of media imagery, which is then continuously interrupted by misleading and anti-climactic credits

⁶⁴ Sitney, *Visionary Film*, xii.

⁶⁵ Here, I limit my discussion on medium-specificity in avant-garde cinema to Sitney’s foundational argument about structural film. Since Sitney’s initial discussion in 1969, much has been written about this issue, with one of the most important contributions being from the often-polarizing voice of art historian Rosalind Krauss. In her influential writings on “the post-medium condition,” Krauss expands on a Greenbergian model of modernist medium-specificity to account for film’s “constitutive heterogeneity,” wherein “medium” is defined as “a set of conventions derived from (but not identical to) the material conditions of a given technical support.” See Rosalind E. Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000). For two insightful commentaries on Krauss’s theory of the “post-medium condition” and its relevance to avant-garde cinema, see Ji-hoon Kim, “The Post-Medium Condition and the Explosion of Cinema,” *Screen* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 114–123; Erika Balsom, “A Cinema in the Gallery, A Cinema in Ruins,” *Screen* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 411–427. Though Krauss’s theories, especially her “expanded” definition of medium, are often compelling, for the interests of this study, they serve as a dead-end. Krauss’s career-long commitment to recuperating a modernist-inflected notion of medium-specific critique renders her genealogies of postwar moving-image art—from cinema to video—conspicuously limited to an exclusive club of exemplary artists and works, one that by definition excludes Conner and a whole range of other filmmakers and artists who do not ascribe to the crypto-Greenbergian values that undergird Krauss’s work. For an incisive rebuttal to Krauss’s theory of the “post-medium condition,” see Andrew V. Uroskie, *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), especially 233–238.

and cues. At the same time, *A MOVIE* also foregrounds the materiality of film through its inclusion of elements that conventionally remain unseen by the audience: perforated celluloid, countdown leader, out-of-order and upside-down intertitles, and the graininess of fading, nearly expired film stock. Importantly, Conner doesn't simply reveal that which is usually kept "behind-the-scenes," confined to the editing room or the projectionist's booth. Rather, he incorporates these flaws, "outtakes" and directives into his "meta-movie," insisting that they are integral to the total picture of cinema that *A MOVIE* celebrates. By emphasizing the narrative tropes of classical Hollywood film, the formal conventions of the classical style (i.e. continuity editing, the 180-degree rule), as well as the materiality of the medium itself, *A MOVIE* poses a challenge to the dominant formalist discourse on avant-garde film and medium-specificity formulated by Sitney and since taken up by numerous other critics and historians. Rather than stripping away external references in pursuit of film's structural "essence," *A MOVIE* generates a medium-specific critique that is explicitly anchored in the historical, cultural, as well as formal codes of mainstream commercial cinema, especially Hollywood cinema.

By the late 1950s, Hollywood's economic and cultural dominance was slipping, largely due to the rapid spike in postwar television ownership. The late 1950s also witnessed the rise of the European New Waves, soon followed by the emergence of New Hollywood's independent and often more experimental productions. Thus, Conner began making films at a historical moment when the classical Hollywood cinema was actually in decline. His attraction to the obsolescent and outmoded cast-offs of an earlier era, a bygone golden age, speaks to the historically conscious, dialectical approach he brought to his nascent filmmaking practice. Rather than isolate or purify cinema of historical context and cultural reference, and rather than regard Hollywood in Sitney's terms, as "radically other," Conner's film immerses its audience in the

chaotic, impure, and wildly entertaining spectacle that is the cinema, both inviting and defying them to piece together “a movie” out of borrowed fragments from a rapidly fading dream.

Femme Fatales and Blonde Bombshells

The decline of classical Hollywood in the late 1950s also marked the decline of McCarthyism, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), and other hallmarks of the Cold War era’s anti-communist fervor. However, the threat of atomic war remained imminent, and “the bomb” was a source of widespread anxiety. The 1950s witnessed the release of dozens of Cold War-themed movies, from science fiction films with post-apocalyptic and anti-communist messages like *THEM!* (Gordon Douglas, 1954), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1955), to atomic age *film noirs* like *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955) and *Pickup on South Street* (Samuel Fuller, 1953), and slightly later, darkly comic satires of Cold War anxiety like *Dr. Strangelove: or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964).⁶⁶ These films mirrored the heightened political anxieties of the time by thematizing and often allegorizing their complex ideological commitments—anti-communism, capitalist consumerism, Christian virtue. But importantly, the perceived “enemy threat” of Soviet infiltration was often paired with the threat of domestic subversion, a threat that typically took the form of an enchanting *femme fatale*. According to this logic, sex, particularly female

⁶⁶ There is an extensive and growing body of literature on Cold War themes in American cinema. One key contribution is Michael Rogin, “Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies,” *Representations* no. 6 (Spring 1984): 1–36. Cynthia Hendershot has also published extensively on the topic, see her *Anti-Communism and Popular Culture in Mid-Century America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2003); *I Was a Cold War Monster: Horror Films, Eroticism, and the Cold War Imagination* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State Popular Press, 2001); and *Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction Film* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State Popular Press, 1999). A more general discussion of atomic age culture is offered in Margot A. Henrikson, *Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

sexuality, was inextricably linked to Soviet communism, the atomic threat, and ultimately, apocalyptic annihilation.

In her landmark study *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, cultural historian Elaine Tyler May provides a probing analysis of Cold War gender politics, demonstrating how the global superpowers' decades-long struggle for economic, military, and political dominance also inaugurated a cultural and ideological crisis within the American family, where, May argues, "women were the focus of concern." May continues:

It was important to recognize [women's] increasing sexual and economic emancipation, but to channel those energies into the family. Outside the home (or even inside the home without a strong male authority), [women] would become a dangerous, destructive force. This message was overtly expressed in the literature surrounding the cold war, civil defense, and the family. Both public and private life came under the influence by containment ideology, which aimed to curb the tide of communist subversion and promote American cultural values.⁶⁷

Thus, while the Cold War had major political repercussions abroad, it also exerted pressure on the private, domestic front, where "It was not just nuclear energy that had to be contained, but the social and sexual fallout of the atomic age itself."⁶⁸

The Cold War's "sexual containment ethos" found expression through a discursive coupling of women, particularly sexually provocative women, with the atomic threat.⁶⁹ One key example is the "explosive" rise of the two-piece bathing suit. The midriff-baring design was simultaneously debuted by two French designers, Louis Réard and Jacques Heim in July 1946, the same month that the U.S. military conducted "Operation Crossroads," a series of underwater atomic bomb tests staged near Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. Réard named his design,

⁶⁷ May, 105.

⁶⁸ May, 73.

⁶⁹ Other examples of this discursive coupling of the bomb with feminine sexuality is provided in Paul S. Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), especially 11-12.

“L’Atome,” but after images of the Bikini tests were released to the public, Heim’s moniker, “Le Bikini,” proved more lasting. Besides inspiring the Bikini, “Operation Crossroads” made a major impact on Conner’s work; newsreel footage of the tests resurfaces in many of his films, including *A MOVIE*, *COSMIC RAY*, *REPORT*, and archival military footage of the tests is the sole subject of his 1976 film, *CROSSROADS*.

A similarly explicit analogy between the apocalyptic threat of the atomic bomb and the erotic threat of female sexuality is the motif of the “bombshell,” a seductive, sexually available woman who, like an atomic age Helen of Troy or Pandora, threaten to end civilization through the sheer force of her desirability to men. The term “bombshell” first emerged during the mid-1930s, when glamorous Hollywood starlet Jean Harlow was frequently referred to as a “blonde bombshell” due to the explosive, potentially threatening nature of her sexual allure. During the Cold War, the bombshell motif was often taken to literal extremes. For instance, May and numerous other sources on the atomic age refer to the popular legend that a photograph (or perhaps a drawing) of actress Rita Hayworth was attached to one of the hydrogen bombs dropped during Operation Crossroads. In the publicity blitz that accompanied the tests, numerous news outlets reported that the “Able” bomb was emblazoned with an image of Hayworth from her recent *femme fatale* role in the 1946 film noir classic, *Gilda* (dir. Charles Vidor). (fig. 1.12).

Of course, bombshells didn’t necessarily have to be Hollywood stars—relatively anonymous women could also qualify for the title, as long as their sex appeal could be regarded as threatening. Mobilizing a particularly literal interpretation of the term, the *Las Vegas Sun* newspaper in Nevada held a contest called “Miss Atomic Bomb,” in which local showgirls were selected to pose for photo shoots while wearing mushroom cloud-shaped bikinis; the photos were

then used to promote the local atomic research industry (fig. 1.13). The contest lasted six years, from 1952-1957, spanning the peak period of Cold War anxiety and anti-communist hysteria.

Considered in light of its popularity in 1950s visual culture, Conner's use of the bombshell motif in *A MOVIE* was thus quite *au courant*. Conner appropriated this popular metaphor from atomic age mass culture and in doing so, transformed its metaphorical linkage between sex and death into a relation of *causation* and *equivalence*. In this sense, *A MOVIE* participates in the period's vogue for psychoanalytic theory, specifically Freudian analysis, which offered an appealing interpretive model to postwar American subjects that were wounded in battle, confined in the home, wracked with existential anxieties and neurosis, and suffering under socially-enforced sexual repression. Though it is tempting to read Conner's curiously dense fusion of the sex and death drives in *A MOVIE* through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis, the film resists such a hermeneutic by hyperbolizing its terms, pushing the psychoanalytic logic of symbolic signification and unconscious drives to cartoonish extremes. In his next film, *COSMIC RAY*, Conner once again utilized a popularized version of Freudian vocabulary, this time, by mimicking the form and style of commercial advertising—an industry that was notoriously indebted to psychoanalytic theory in its attempt to activate unconscious desires on behalf of commodity consumption.

Sex, Race and Blindness in *COSMIC RAY* (1961)

In so far as *A MOVIE* appropriates the conventions of Hollywood film—and in particular, the style of “coming attractions,” movie trailers, and formulaic storylines—to pose a critique of Cold War apocalyptic thinking and sexual paranoia, Conner's second film, *COSMIC RAY* (1961), looks to a parallel arena of mass media spectacle: modern advertising, and in particular,

the compressed temporality, visual magnetism, and second-person direct appeal of the broadcast television commercial. Like *A MOVIE*, *COSMIC RAY* similarly invests an industrial, commercial form with unexpectedly subversive content by deploying a highly gendered, Manichean iconography of sex and death, bombs and bombshells. But it also introduces an additional layer of cultural signification as one of the first and most influential works of postwar American avant-garde cinema to utilize appropriated pop music as its soundtrack.

COSMIC RAY revisits the same themes and materials Conner explored in *A MOVIE*, this time investing them with deeper cultural, political, and sexual significance. *COSMIC RAY* is also Conner's first and only film to combine found footage fragments with original footage that he shot himself. The film's "main attraction" is Beth Pewther, who dances and poses, completely nude, shaking her breasts while flipping her long hair—a free-spirited bohemian bombshell.⁷⁰ Images of Pewther's naked body are intercut with a wide range of found footage derived from advertisements, stock footage, newsreels, cartoons, and educational shorts. For the soundtrack, Conner selected a piece of pulsating, percussive R&B music: a rowdy live recording of Ray Charles's hit 1959 song, "What'd I Say." The song is remarkable in its synthesis of gospel, blues, and Latin musical styles, and was considered scandalous for its sexually suggestive call-and-response refrains, in which Charles and his female back-up singers performed a relay of moans and groans that mimic that of two lovers in the throes of passion.

Throughout the film Conner's camera focuses attentively on Pewther's naked body as she shimmies to the beat of Charles's rousing performance. At times, footage of a fireworks display

⁷⁰ Pewther's scenes were shot sometime between 1960 and 1961, when she and Conner lived in the same apartment building at 1205 Oak Street in San Francisco's Fillmore district, a traditionally working-class neighborhood with a large African-American population. Pewther had moved to San Francisco from Wichita in the late 1950s with her first husband, Bob Branaman, an artist and filmmaker who had shot some of the street footage that would appear in Conner's next film, *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* (1959-1967). Branaman and Conner's collaboration is discussed in the next chapter.

is superimposed onto her body, creating a layered, visually disorienting effect, while driving home the implication that her sexuality is literally explosive. At times, COSMIC RAY crosses the boundary between soft-core erotica and explicit pornography. Though Pewther has no partner, and always appears solo against the darkened, empty background, her eye contact with the camera lens and responsive facial expressions and body language are constant reminders of Conner's presence behind the scenes, and by extension, of the aroused gaze of the (male) cinematic spectator.

At the film's mid-point, Pewther spreads a translucent fluid across her bare breasts and torso that makes her skin glisten. Whatever the true nature of the substance, the reference to seminal fluid is undeniable, and becomes especially suggestive in the following scenes when Pewther lies prone on the floor and slowly removes a pair of panties, as if in preparation for the act. During this section of the film, Conner superimposes multiple images of coiled and free-hanging strands of pearls onto Pewther's nude body—a possible visual pun on the sexual act known as a “pearl necklace.” Yet, just as in A MOVIE, this uninhibited erotic spectacle does not go unpunished, since the threat of violence and destruction are ever-present, reminders of one's mortality and of the anxious climate of the Cold War from which Conner's ecstatic vision was born.

During the first half of the film, the found material is predominately comprised of academy leader and other varieties of perforated and otherwise spoiled stock, the same class of secondhand, scrap materials that Conner previously showcased in A MOVIE. Likewise, COSMIC RAY also includes short sequences of ethnographic footage—including a few brief shots of what seem to be a line of South American tribesmen hopping up and down, intercut with images of a muscular, bare-chested black man, who appears to be rowing a raft in order to escape

from an attacking cheetah. Nestled between these “tribal” images is the ominous spectacle of a mushroom cloud, followed by an aerial shot of a city attributed the blurry caption: “Nagasaki” (fig. 1:14-1.17).

The latter half of the film includes another “tribal” image—an Indian chief in full headdress, who appears to be commanding his warriors. Yet, the remaining found imagery is primarily related to modern militarism and violence—including the famous image of U.S. troops erecting the American flag at Iwo Jima, as well as more generic images from battles, missile launches, and bombings, including the newsreel footage of the Bikini Atoll mushroom cloud that Conner previously featured in *A MOVIE*. Oscillating between the erotic and the apocalyptic, *COSMIC RAY* is structured like a sustained *coitus interruptus*, where the threat of death and destruction continuously disrupt the possibility of immersive pleasure, until ultimately, the distinction between sex and death becomes blurred in an explosive, sublime display of orgasmic release.

Besides the prevalence of militaristic and violent imagery, Conner codes Pewther’s body itself as a potentially deadly force through his use of associative montage, rhythmic editing, graphic matches and visual analogies that flit by almost too quickly to register. In one such instance, Conner pairs footage of a missile launch with a nearly imperceptible flash of Pewther holding a broom between her legs (fig. 1.18-1.19).⁷¹ Shot in profile, she resembles a witch flying through the night sky. The succession of images result in a graphic match between the missile and the broom, and, by extension, suggests a metaphoric connection between Pewther’s nude body and the bomb. This fleeting scene anticipates one of the most iconic images in Cold War visual culture, from the famous finale of *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying*

⁷¹ This sequence of shots is also discussed by Bruce Jenkins, “Explosion in a Film Factory: The Cinema of Bruce Conner,” in *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1999), 197.

and Love the Bomb (1964), Stanley Kubrick's darkly comic send-up of the Cold War arms race and the military industrial complex. Poised at the brink of nuclear Armageddon, actor Slim Pickens mounts the atomic missile that will finally ignite the fuse of "mutually assured destruction." Pickens straddles the bomb as it plummets to the ground, waving his hat like rodeo cowboy atop a bucking bronco (fig. 1.20). The sexual innuendo is quite explicit—to "stop worrying and love the bomb," Kubrick suggests, is to embrace the erotics of annihilation symbolized by the atomic threat, in all its sublime, terrible beauty.

Immediately before Pewther is seen straddling the broom, she is shown in close up with an even more macabre prop—a human skull—which she balances on top of her nude pudenda (fig. 1.21). The image offers an atomic age reinterpretation of "Death and the Maiden," a popular theme in visual culture of the German Renaissance, when artists like Albrecht Dürer and Hans Baldung Grien repeatedly painted the motif, along with the character of the witch, a misogynist archetype of deadly, castrating womanhood.⁷² Viewed through the lens of art history, COSMIC RAY thus emerges as a self-reflexive, modern re-interpretation of the longstanding visual trope of misogynist fantasies involving women, sex, and death. To acknowledge Conner's use of these archetypal images serves as a useful reminder that not all critiques of patriarchal codes and violence are necessarily feminist.

These iconographic cues are not confined to Western archetypes. At one point, Conner multiple-exposes a medium shot of Pewther tenting her arms while wearing a hat, giving the impression of a multi-limbed, arachnid-like figure—the spider-woman, yet another visual trope of feminine entrapment and death (fig. 1.22). The multi-armed image also recalls Vishnu, the

⁷² There is an extensive literature on Grien and Dürer's misogynistic images of witches and "death and the maiden" iconography; for instance, see Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Margaret A. Sullivan, "The Witches of Dürer and Hans Baldung Grien," *Renaissance Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 333–401.

multi-armed Hindu god, who is often depicted waving his arms in a circular formation, similar to Pewther's movements.⁷³ Vishnu attained a special relevance in discussions of the atomic bomb, due to the famous atomic scientist and architect of the Manhattan Project, J. Robert Oppenheimer, who recalled his identification with Vishnu after discovering how to weaponize atomic energy in 1945, often quoting from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, stating, "I am become death, destroyer of worlds."⁷⁴

During the final moments of *COSMIC RAY*, the pace of the montage quickens, and images of missiles, explosions, and battles become more frequent. Propelled by Charles's visceral live performance and intercut with images of death and destruction, Pewther's playful striptease emerges as a *danse macabre*, layered with symbolic significance and somatic suggestion. The Mickey Mouse cartoon returns, but now, the cannon droops in a flaccid wilt—comically signaling its impotence and failure. At the film's climax, there is a rapid series of still shots of the painter Joan Brown, posing, her chest slightly exposed, while wearing an array of eccentric headwear: hats, scarves, a coffee can, a lampshade, and finally, a small American flag waved behind her head by an unseen figure. Although the scene initially seems out-of-place, it is a testament to Conner's propensity to cast his female friends in his films—Pewther and Brown in *COSMIC RAY*, and later, Vivian Kurz in *VIVIAN* (1964), Toni Basil in *BREAKAWAY* (1966), and Jay Defeo in *THE WHITE ROSE* (1967). After Brown's brief cameo, Conner inserts a few

⁷³ In Hindu traditions, Vishnu is typically depicted as a male with blue skin and four arms, and is regarded as the supreme destroyer and creator of all things, the organizer of past, present, and future times. Bruce Jenkins has described this shot of Pewther as an allusion to a Hindu deity, though he mistakenly refers to her as a "many-armed, Shiva-like goddess," even though Shiva is a male deity and never pictured as multi-armed. Jenkins, "Explosion in a Film Factory: The Cinema of Bruce Conner," 196.

⁷⁴ One of the first time's Oppenheimer's famous quotation from the *Bhagavad-Gita* appeared in print was William L. Laurence, *Men and Atoms: The Discovery, the Uses and the Future of Atomic Energy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959). Oppenheimer repeated the lines during an interview for the documentary, "The Decision to Drop the Bomb," which was aired on television in 1965. For more on Oppenheimer's famous quote, see James A. Hijiya, "The Gita of J. Robert Oppenheimer," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 144, no. No. 2 (June 2000): 123–167.

frames of blank countdown leader—including the iconic “crosshairs,” and eventually cuts to black. The film continues for the remainder of the audio recording, which captures the audiences’ wild applause while an MC exclaims, “The high priest, Ray Charles himself, what a show!”

At about four-and-a-half minutes, less than half the run time of *A MOVIE, COSMIC RAY* presents a hypnotic, libidinally-charged vision of Cold War America. Though Pewther plays a leading role as the fetishized object of the camera’s (and thus Conner’s) gaze, the film’s ostensive subject is Ray Charles; he is the “Cosmic Ray” who supplies the film’s title, sound, and rhythmic structure. As with Conner’s other films, music, and specifically, an African American musical genre, provided the inspiration and the structuring principle behind the film; as he later remarked, “The movie grew out of the music.”⁷⁵ Above all, Conner conceptualized the film as a sincere homage to Charles, whom he deeply admired. Discussing the film at the 1968 Flaherty Seminar, Conner indicated his appreciation for Charles’s music but also his deep sense of affinity with the musician himself, “I felt that I was, in a way, presenting the eyes for Ray Charles who is a blind musician. That this was his...I was supplying his vision.”⁷⁶

The film’s title carries multiple meanings. On the one hand, it designates Charles as “cosmic,” a timeless, universal figure of towering genius. This quasi-mythological status is further enhanced by the fact of Charles’s blindness—a key attribute of ancient oracles and prophets, his lack of sight makes his musical skill appear all the more remarkable. On the other

⁷⁵ Conner continues, “[*COSMIC RAY* features] Ray Charles singing “What Did I Say” a live recording in Atlanta, Georgia. If I was driving when that music came on KSOL or the other black music station in San Francisco, I try to move the car on the freeway as soon as possible and drive with a great rush through all the lights of the freeway onto the bridge. So I started shooting film out of my car with multiple lights to go with that music. I timed the music with a stop watch. Then I broke it down into timed phrases and transferred that into how many frames per second. All the rest of it was done with me counting the frames physically without a synchronizer.” Hudina, “Bruce Conner: Visitor in the World,” 5-6.

⁷⁶ From a transcript of the discussion following a screening of Conner’s films at the 1968 Flaherty Seminar, published as “Bruce Conner,” *Film Comment* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1969), 17.

hand, “cosmic ray” also refers to a specific kind of high-energy particle that is commonly associated with atomic radiation—a force that had been harnessed by the atomic bomb but could not be completely controlled. Conner’s film mobilizes these multivalent significations by linking a mythic ideal of Afro-American masculine creativity (Charles) with uninhibited sexuality (Pewther’s dancing), and uniting them under the banner of a characteristically Cold War-era fascination with atomic energy—a catalytic fusion of bombs, bombshells and black music.

In 1960, the National Academy of Sciences, working with McGraw-Hill, the textbook company, and the public television station WGBH-Boston, produced a short, 16mm educational film entitled “Cosmic Rays,” for their “Planet Earth Film Series.”⁷⁷ The film offers a close study of cosmic rays, explains their significance within the fields of atomic and nuclear physics, and offered viewers a glimpse at sophisticated technologies for measuring and studying these microscopic particles. The film was designed for school-age and television audiences, and indicates the American public’s fascination with atomic science during the height of the Cold War, as well as the U.S. Government’s desire to make atomic energy appear less menacing and easier to comprehend.

Part of the official strategy for demystifying atomic energy in general and cosmic rays in particular, it seems, was to personify it, and in doing so, *eroticize* it. In *Homeward Bound*, May points to an instance where cosmic rays became associated with threatening female sexuality, in a 1972 civil defense pamphlet depicting alpha, beta and gamma rays using cartoons images of a sexy blond, brunette, and redheaded woman, respectively. The text of the pamphlet explained

⁷⁷ *Cosmic Rays*, National Academy of Sciences, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1960. Producer: Lothar Wolff; adviser: Hugh Odishaw. 29 min., b+w, 16mm. The film’s WorldCat listing describes it as “A study of cosmic rays, how they were discovered, how they are measured, and how they affect research, especially in the fields of atomic and nuclear physics. Includes views of the atomic accelerator at Brookhaven, the Sky-hook balloon, the launching of the nuclear submarine, the Meson telescope, the dish-shaped antennas at the National Radio Observatory, and other instruments used by astronomers and physicists in studying cosmic rays.”

that “Radioactivity is also energy—but this time the rays come invisibly; alpha, beta, and gamma rays cause varying degrees of silent damage. [...] Like energy from the sun, these rays are potentially both harmful and helpful,” and by implication, women, just like atomic energy, are both socially necessary but potentially dangerous.⁷⁸

Just as COSMIC RAY was not unique in positing a visual analogy between sexualized women and cosmic rays, Conner was also not the first to forge a conceptual link between black music and atomic energy. The connection had, in fact, been made a decade earlier by an African American musician, the legendary jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker, who in late 1952 recorded two versions of an improvised set which he titled “Cosmic Rays.” Parker, known to his followers as “Bird,” was a renegade figure in jazz who, along with Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and others, pioneered the postwar genre of bebop, a style characterized by its frenetic pace, dissonance, and extended improvised solos. As jazz historian Lewis A. Erenberg explains, bebop was regarded as a rebellious, iconoclastic style that was considered less accessible to mainstream, particularly white, audiences, and thus signaled black musicians’ rejection of the Cold War’s culturally conformist imperatives. Erenberg describes how for young hipsters, “Bird” was the iconic bebop rebel, who, in the words of novelist Ralph Ellison, was “‘a suffering, psychically wounded, law-breaking, life-affirming hero,’ fighting to affirm his individual identity in an oppressively rationalized society.”⁷⁹ By naming his recording “Cosmic Rays,” Parker linked his personal myth of unrestrained, non-conformist African American creativity and virtuosic musical skill with the untamed, life-threatening force of atomic energy. COSMIC RAY revives this

⁷⁸ Elaine Tyler May, “Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb,” in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (Basic Books, 1988), 105.

⁷⁹ Erenberg, Lewis A., “Things to Come: Swing Bands, Bebop, and the Rise of a Postwar Jazz Scene,” in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 238.

discursive connection between black music and atomic energy, but adds a new, potent ingredient: sex, and by implication, miscegenation, by coupling the black musician with a white woman.

The same year he completed COSMIC RAY, Conner produced an assemblage entitled RAY CHARLES/SNAKESKIN, which he sold to the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles and was acquired by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1964 (fig. 1.23). Conner described the assemblage in similar terms to COSMIC RAY, as an artistic homage to Charles:

It was a tribute to the admiration which I felt for the blind musician and for Rhythm and Blues music. It's a sort of poetic statement to Ray Charles and to changing your skin I suppose. That's what he was on about.⁸⁰

Following Conner, we might interpret a song like “What’d I Say” as expressing a set of interrelated desires: for sexual mastery, masculine prowess, transcendence from disability and, by extension, from racial subordination. Yet, I would argue that Conner’s concept of “changing your skin” is better understood as a projection of his own desires and cross-racial identification than a description of Charles’s music. Indeed, there is nothing about Charles’s sound that suggests a disavowal of “blackness”; rather, his Gospel-infused sound is better described as a celebration and innovation of black musical traditions. In short, it is not Charles who desires to “change his skin,” but Conner.⁸¹ Thus, in both RAY CHARLES/SNAKESKIN and COSMIC

⁸⁰ Bruce Conner, “Bruce Conner on Bruce Conner: From a conversation by telephone between the artist and Jeanette Hoorn on December 1, 1980.” Bruce Conner Curatorial File, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

⁸¹ Conner’s remarks follow from a long tradition of white male identification with and appropriation of African American culture, for instance, in the postwar period, Rock ‘n’ Roll’s appropriation of blues and R+B (Elvis, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones), and in the previous century, by the more insidiously racist phenomenon of blackface performance. In a landmark study of the history of American minstrelsy, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, historian Eric Lott discusses the uncanny phenomenon of blackface performance alongside more subtle forms of racial mimicry, appropriation, and identification, characterizing these practices as unconscious manifestations of white, working-class male desire for the black body. Lott argues that this desire is dialectical, characterized by a push-and-pull between fascination and disgust, attraction and guilt, affection and oppression. See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

RAY, Conner elaborates on his imaginary identification between himself, a white, fully-sighted, middle-class Midwestern artist, and Charles, an African-American, blind, working-class Southern musician. In doing so, Conner, a consummate white hipster, claimed an affinity with Africans Americans, a group that remained politically marginalized and economically excluded from the postwar affluence that was considered a hallmark of the Cold War “culture of consensus.”⁸²

In COSMIC RAY, Conner masks (or re-channels) this (inter-racial, identificatory) desire for Charles by way of a third term—Pewther—whom he positions as a common object of sexual desire for him and Charles to share. Thus, by “supplying his vision,” Conner attempts to forge a bond with the blind musician through mutual heterosexual arousal— projecting his desire for Charles onto his desire for Pewther’s nude body. Interestingly, the latent homoeroticism of Conner’s desiring identification with Charles reappears, in sublimated form, in Conner’s later descriptions of COSMIC RAY, in which he defends the film as a critique of militarism and defense of normative, “natural” heterosexuality. Conner frequently characterized COSMIC RAY as a battle of “death against life,” or, of the destructive forces of violence against the creative (or procreative) forces of sex, a struggle that elsewhere he aligned with the idea of *censorship*:

COSMIC RAY is about censorship [...] To talk about censorship you have to show something of what is being censored. What I think censorship is—is death against life and that those forms which are used to kill people are those which are used for censorship. The organization which creates war—creates the army—is opposed to sex, they’re opposed to procreation. The army is the largest homosexual organization in the United States. They not only rechannel the creativity of men towards death by withdrawing them from the society of women, but they kill the fruit of the womb. This has something to do

⁸² “Culture of consensus” refers to an ideological assertion of American cultural and political unity that came to the fore during the Cold War. Embodied by the writings of liberal intellectuals such as Daniel Bell, consensus discourse dictated that the United States’ increasing affluence, rapidly expanding industrial economy, thriving middle class and booming consumer culture were more than a palliative for social inequality; together, these conditions would actually correct existing inequalities, rendering political ideology irrelevant. For more on the pivotal role of African Americans in the Cold War consensus, see Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

with the images in the film [COSMIC RAY]—the numbered leader, the information which you are not supposed to see. The projectionist who controls the projector is not supposed to let you see that, it's *verboten*.”⁸³

Conner's remark that the army is “the largest homosexual organization in the United States,” reflects his suspicion, even hostility, towards the homosocial and homoerotic aspects of modern machismo and military culture, but it also reveals his deeply essentialist understanding of masculine and feminine principles. This starkly gendered, hetero-normative perspective informed the way he conceptualized his own work in terms of the fundamental tension between censorship—as a “homosexual” perversion of the masculine/feminine dynamic, resulting in death—versus artistic, sexual and spiritual freedom—as a natural, harmonious condition.

Conner frequently used the juxtaposition of violent “masculine” imagery with erotic “feminine” imagery in order to illustrate this tension, which he considered fundamental to modern American society. His gender politics were thus embedded within a broader critique of mainstream society and institutional power, which he understood as dually oppressive of both men and women by forcing them to conform to codes of “acceptable” behavior that are inherently repressive and unnatural. Unpacking Conner's essentialist views of gender is key to understanding why his utopian vision of spiritual and sexual liberation in films like COSMIC RAY (and later, BREAKAWAY) takes the form of a woman dancing seductively to a pop soundtrack; for Conner, this imagery was the visual embodiment of freedom and creativity, and the triumph of “life” against “death.” This outlook, however positive its implications for the female sex, is still problematically essentialist, and should not be conflated with the political goals of the nascent women's liberation movement, whose primary agenda was to disentangle

⁸³ “Bruce Conner,” *Film Comment* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1969), 20.

women's biological capacity for reproduction from their professional, legal and social identities, or to put it simply, to demand that anatomy is not destiny.

In Conner's "uncensored" vision of (interracial) love and (Cold) war, that which is typically kept hidden is brought out into the open. Nevertheless, COSMIC RAY remains a mysterious work due to the fact that much of its content and meaning is, in a sense, "concealed" in the surfeit of cuts that Conner inserts into the film's densely packed montage. This concealment was intentional. Conner completed editing COSMIC RAY towards the end of 1961, while he was living in Mexico City. Around the same time, he wrote a letter to Streiff, his friend back in Wichita who had supplied the "girlie movie" that Conner cherished and ultimately used in A MOVIE. In the letter, Conner describes his most recently completed film, COSMIC RAY:

I have finished one movie called COSMIC RAY which is 4 min. and has WHAT DID I SAY by Ray Charles for music and naked [sic] lady screen and leader NO.s flashing and U.S. Army and Mickey Mouse. I edited it so it would go subliminal and just a little too fast but I didn't run it on a projector until I went to Los Angeles and had prints made—then I discovered it went twice as fast as I thought. Anyway—I doubt you will see it at your neighborhood film society because of naked [sic] lady.⁸⁴

Conner's comment that he had "edited [COSMIC RAY] so it would go subliminal" reflects his interest in using film (edited to run "a little too fast") to test and expand the thresholds of perception. The adjective "subliminal" shares an etymology with the word "sublime," with both terms utilizing the prefix *sub-*, which means *under* or *up to*, with the word *limen*, which means *threshold*, or *entrance*. Whereas "sublime" refers to aesthetic experiences that exceed perceptual thresholds—due to their overwhelming beauty, scale, multitude, or threatening nature—the cognate term "subliminal" denotes a register of experience that hovers

⁸⁴ Undated letter to Lee Streiff, The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Re-printed in *Bruce Conner On Drugs (and art)*, a limited edition hand-printed book with an introduction by Bancroft librarian Dean Smith, published by The Bancroft Library Press, University of California, Berkeley, 2011.

just beneath the threshold of everyday perception, influencing us in subtler, even subconscious ways.

Subliminal messaging is often associated with psychological manipulation, and was an especially prominent motif during the paranoid Cold War years, as embodied by the brainwashed Korean War POW at the center of the John Frankenheimer's 1962 suspense-thriller, *The Manchurian Candidate*. Rather than this paranoid discourse on Communist brainwashing and domestic infiltration, Conner's use of the term "subliminal" instead suggests a correlation between his trademark rapid-fire editing of visually stimulating found footage—of the "naked lady," "Mickey Mouse and U.S. Army"—and the style and tempo of commercial television advertising. Indeed, Conner often remarked, somewhat proudly, that advertising agencies frequently rented prints of his films, particularly COSMIC RAY and LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS, arguably his two most hypnotic and visually arresting works.⁸⁵

Commercial advertisements supposedly hold the power to mobilize the "power of suggestion" in order to activate consumer desire—for goods, services, and even political candidates. To meet the demands of a booming consumer culture, the postwar advertising industry developed new methods to chart and influence patterns of consumption, often by borrowing insights from behavioral psychology and psychoanalytic theory. In 1957, journalist Vance Packard published *The Hidden Persuaders*, a bestselling exposé on the ethically dubious practices of the advertising industry, including "motivational research," and various forms of psychological manipulation. According to film historian Charles Acland, *The Hidden Persuaders* "crystallized public awareness of the expanding role played by psychological and psychoanalytic

⁸⁵ Scott MacDonald, "Bruce Conner," in *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with American Independent Filmmakers*, vol. V (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 250.

concepts for modern marketing methods.”⁸⁶ Though Packard does not explicitly reference subliminal messaging in the text, he later laid claim to the critique of subliminal communication that emerged as a result of his book’s massive popularity.⁸⁷

The Hidden Persuaders pays particular attention to the practices of so-called “depth merchandisers,” or, advertisers who identify and then trigger unconscious anxieties, such as the desire for emotional security, immortality, or a sense of power or mastery, in order to sell their products. For instance, in a chapter entitled “The Built-In Sexual Overtone,” Packard elaborates on the familiar adage, “sex sells”:

The potency of sex as a sales promoter was not, of course, an original discovery of the depth merchandisers. Sex images have long been cherished by ad men purely as eye stoppers. But with the depth approach, sex began taking on some interesting twists, ramifications, and subtleties. *Penetration* to deeper levels of consciousness was sought. Simple cheesecake and get-your-man themes of old, while used for routine selling, were regarded as *limited-penetration weapons*.⁸⁸ [emphasis added]

Packard’s fusion of sexual and militaristic terminology—wherein erotic imagery is deployed as “limited-penetration weapons” into the unconscious—is emblematic of the era’s discursive conflation of sex and violence, as well as the popular fascination with Freudian understandings of the human psyche. In *COSMIC RAY*, Conner engages a parallel discourse, by deploying lightning-fast images of sex and violence in order to activate unconscious desires that, he insists, typically remain “censored.”

Obviously, a blind man like Charles would not be susceptible to the visual spectacle of modern advertising, and thus would have been mostly immune to the “subliminal messages” embedded within it. Thus, by “supplying his vision,” Conner actually takes on the role of a

⁸⁶ Charles R. Acland, *Swift Viewing: The Popular Life of Subliminal Influence* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 106.

⁸⁷ Acland, 108-109.

⁸⁸ Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: D. McKay Co., 1957), 95.

countercultural “hidden persuader,” using rapid-fire associative montage to stir unconscious desires, not for commodities, but rather, for what is typically regarded as “verboten.” Rather than assert control over the viewer’s unconscious in the interests of capital, COSMIC RAY deploys subliminal effects in an effort to unchain sense-perception from material reality and test the thresholds of the sensible, ostensibly, in the spirit of liberating perception from controlling external forces. In this sense, Conner used the subliminal as a kind of perceptual backdoor into the sublime. But, instead of an awe-inspiring landscape or terrifying storm at sea, he depicts the cultural fallout of Cold War America—a terrifyingly beautiful spectacle of sex, race, and the bomb—viewed from dizzying heights and at breakneck speed.

While finishing editing COSMIC RAY in Mexico City in late 1961, Conner received a visit from Timothy Leary, the ex-Harvard professor and renowned psychedelic guru.⁸⁹ Leary’s exposure to Conner’s work would exert a strong influence on his understanding of psychedelic perception. In a 1965 essay “Languages: Energy Systems Sent and Received,” Leary specifically designates COSMIC RAY as a work that illustrates psychedelic vision, writing: “Bruce Conner’s ‘Cosmic Ray’ movie has pulsing rhythm of abstract forms out of which emerge now a naked woman, now marching soldiers, now parachutes, now Mickey Mouse.”⁹⁰ Leary’s emphasis on the film’s “subliminal” effects points to COSMIC RAY’s proto-psychedelic quality, marking it as a point of transition between the disastrous, tragicomic spectacle of A MOVIE and the visually alluring psychedelia of LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959-1967), the subject of the next chapter.

⁸⁹ Los Angeles curator Walter Hopps confirms that Conner completed editing COSMIC RAY living in Mexico. See Hopps, “Bruce Conner,” *Bomb* no. 80 (Summer 2002), 8–11.

⁹⁰ Timothy Leary, “Languages: Energy Systems Sent and Received,” *Etc.: A Review of General Semantics* XXII, no. 4 (December 1965), 456.

Chapter Two

“No End of the Beginning”: LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959-1967), Light Shows, and Heterotopic Cinema

A MOVIE and COSMIC RAY are products of a Cold War cultural imaginary that register Conner’s starkly gendered and Manichean response to the existential threat posed by nuclear apocalypse. This threat is presented in both films as a symbolic struggle between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, by deploying the iconographic motif of the *femme fatale*, or bombshell, and more explicitly, the image of the atomic bomb itself—symbolic hallmarks of what I have referred to previously as Conner’s atomic sublime aesthetic. This chapter will focus on the evolution of Conner’s filmmaking practice in the decade following his yearlong move to Mexico City in 1961, marking a decisive shift in his aesthetic orientation from the apocalyptic to the psychedelic. This shift, I will argue, was catalyzed by Conner’s encounter with Mexico’s culture and landscape, and his simultaneous pursuit of expanded consciousness through frequent experimentation with psychedelic drugs native to that region, including peyote and *psilocybin* mushrooms.

Conner’s psychedelic film aesthetic first crystallized in LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959-1967), a visionary travelogue that charts the perceptual fallout of a “trip” through rural Mexico and urban America.⁹¹ The title of the film refers to a specific “mushroom-hunting” excursion into the Mexican countryside that Conner made with Timothy Leary, the ex-Harvard professor and outspoken proponent of psychedelic drugs. By the late 1960s, Leary was a full-fledged media celebrity, famous for coining the phrase “Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out,” which

⁹¹ Conner’s film has a growing reputation as the consummate psychedelic film. It recently inspired the title of an exhibition examining the relationship between American artists and the 1960s counterculture, held at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany. See Barbara Engelbach, Friederike Wappler, and Hans Winkler, eds., *Looking for Mushrooms: Beat Poets, Hippies, Funk, Minimal Art, San Francisco, 1955-68* (Cologne, Germany: Museum Ludwig/Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Koenig, 2008).

David Joselit has aptly described as the psychedelic counterculture’s “quasi-televisual mantra.”⁹² Though ultimately short-lived, Conner’s relationship with Leary was an important influence on his artistic practice. During the 1960s, Conner pursued an increasingly “expanded,” dematerialized and ephemeral cinematic practice, including live intermedia events, psychedelic rock & roll light shows, and an experiment with broadcast television. The goal of this expanded practice, I argue, was to *map* the expanded psychic geography of a psychedelic “trip” by tracing new phenomenological routes through space and time. The chapter concludes with an overview of Conner’s involvement in a series of commercial feature films that aimed to capitalize on the thriving psychedelic counterculture and, especially, the new consumer power of youth demographics. Through an analysis of two films directed by Conner’s friend, Dennis Hopper—*Easy Rider* (1969) and *The Last Movie* (1970)—I explore how commercial cinema brought the heterotopic logic of Conner’s psychedelic explorations to a distinctly dystopian conclusion.

Mexico as Subaltern Heterotopia

In September 1961, Bruce and Jean Conner left their apartment at 1205 Oak Street in San Francisco and drove down to Mexico City, just weeks before Conner’s assemblages were to be exhibited in *The Art of Assemblage* at The Museum of Modern Art.⁹³ The couple eventually

⁹² David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 65. For more on Leary’s relationship with mass media, see Joselit, especially 64-83.

⁹³ Jean Conner recalls the move to Mexico as taking place in September 1961. This chronology potentially conflicts with accounts of Bruce’s trip to New York City to install work at the Charles Alan Gallery and at *The Art of Assemblage* exhibition, which opened at MoMA on October 4, 1961. Conner’s and Ray Johnson’s provocative intervention at the MoMA exhibition’s opening night is described by Kevin Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), 33. It is possible that Conner travelled to New York City from Mexico City; as with many of the details of Conner’s biography, the facts are unclear. Jean Conner also recalls that the night before they left for Mexico, Bruce painted the word “LOVE” over the “SLOW” traffic advisory that was painted on the pavement outside their Oak St. apartment; Conner would often return to re-paint the letters in later years, to the perennial annoyance of municipal workers. Author’s interview with Jean Conner, April 12, 2014. A photograph of the “LOVE” sign can be found in Kevin Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner*, 2, though Hatch lists two contradictory

settled in an apartment at Calle Nápoles 77-4, in the Juárez district of the city, just south of the touristic historic center.⁹⁴ A year later, in October 1962, weeks after the birth of their son Robert, the Connors returned to the U.S., settling near Conner's family in Wichita for about six months, and then relocating to Massachusetts, where they remained for almost two years. This series of long-distance moves raises the question: what motivated Conner to abandon his promising art career in the United States immediately after being included in MoMA's landmark exhibition? Conner repeatedly claimed that the main reason was financial: he had heard about the low cost of living in Mexico, and hoped that the move would allow him to focus exclusively on making work rather than earning a living.⁹⁵ Yet, the inevitable decline in his US art sales and the mounting costs of cross-border travel required by immigration agencies, made the move to Mexico much less economically advantageous than he had hoped.

However a second, and perhaps even more urgent factor in the move to Mexico had little to do with the cost of living and more to do with existential anxiety: Conner was convinced of

locations: outside the apartment on Oak Street, and somewhere along Haight Street, which parallels Oak Street two blocks south.

⁹⁴ Hatch mistakenly states that the Connors settled in a "semirural community just outside Mexico City." *Looking for Bruce Conner* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012): 85. Jean Conner clarifies that they lived in the center of the city. The address listed in various documents held in the Bruce Conner Papers and listed on a drawing completed while they lived in Mexico, MUSHROOM, all confirm that the Connors in fact lived in Colonia Juárez, one of Mexico City's better-known urban neighborhoods, adjacent to the main financial center and commercial district—certainly not a "semirural community."

⁹⁵ In 1973, Conner recalled the period of 1961-1963 as peripatetic and financially difficult: "Everybody told me you could live cheap in Mexico. I planned to go to Mexico and live cheap and produce all these great productions. I'd show them in the United States and sell them. I went to Mexico and found out that all in all it cost me more to live there than it did in San Francisco. It cost a lot traveling to and from the border and everything else that I had to contend with. Nobody bought my work when I wasn't in the neighborhood anymore. At the end of that 12 months I came back to the United States. We had a child. My son, Robert, has born in Mexico in 1963. I was totally penniless. Didn't have any money at all. I went to Wichita and lived there. My parents helped me furnish an apartment, gave me some money. I was there for five or six months. I had met Leary in New York before I went to Mexico. We'd gone around looking for mushrooms in Mexico. I made a movie called *Looking for Mushrooms*. Leary kept telling me I should come to Massachusetts and live. I went there at Christmastime for a week and a half. I liked all the people. I liked the place. Later that spring I drove there. When I arrived I found out that everybody had gone to Mexico and that everything was closing up. I was still practically penniless." Cummings, Oral history interview with Bruce Conner.

the certainty of a nuclear attack on the United States, and decided that moving to Mexico and “learning to live in the mountains” was the only way to avoid the atomic threat. However, in attempting to escape the specter of atomic annihilation, Conner found himself in a country and culture that was even more preoccupied with death than that which he had left behind. Reflecting on his motives years later, he remarked: “I was trying to run away from death [...] I picked a terrific place. They worship death there. It's a way of life. I then decided if the bomb was going to drop, I wanted to be right there [in the U.S.] having a terrific party with my friends.”⁹⁶

Ironically, the Connors returned to the U.S. in October 1962, at the absolute height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when atomic war appeared imminent and unavoidable. Jean and the infant Robert flew directly to Kansas, whereas Bruce drove their car and few belongings across the border on his own. Tuning into American radio broadcasts as he approached Texas, Conner worried that “as soon as I got across the border, the whole place was going to get wiped out.” But, rather than turn back, he confronted the threat head-on, bolstered by the realization that “there's really no way to run away from death.”⁹⁷

From these and other statements, it appears that Conner's year in Mexico and the subsequent birth of his son marked a profound transformation in both his psychology and his

⁹⁶ Quoted in Michael Kilgore, “Bruce Conner's Dream-Like Films,” *Tampa Tribune*, May 27, 1979, 2D.

⁹⁷ In 1985, Conner recalled, “I went to Mexico for many reasons. One of them was that I was sure the bomb was going to drop and we'd be annihilated. So I'd go to Mexico and figure out how to live in the mountains after the bomb dropped. I got rid of all my worldly goods and decided to change my life forever, and my wife and I got into the car and drove off for Mexico. What I found, though, in retrospect, was that I was basically running away from death. Mexico is a wonderful place to go if you're running away from death, because they celebrate it, with bells and parades and everything else. So I was continually reminded of death in Mexico—my son was born there—until finally I decided to come back to the United States.” He continued: “I headed back to the United States with dedication. I decided that Mexico was really no place to try to live in the mountains, and there's really no way to run away from death. I started back toward the U.S., and it was though I was heading straight back toward death, because as I reached the border, the Cuban Missile Crisis was starting to become more and more dramatic. As I got closer and closer to the border, I began to hear more and more Texas radio stations. I seemed that what was going to happen was that as soon as I got across the border, the whole place was going to get wiped out. But I decided that I'd rather be with my friends when the bomb dropped.” Interview with Rebecca Solnit, “Bruce Conner: The Assemblage Years,” *Expo-See Magazine*, No. 14 (January-February, 1985).

artistic practice. Although his attempt to flee Cold War America was unsuccessful, Conner's Mexican sojourn was marked by prolific production and experimentation, both artistic and chemical. Soon after returning to the U.S., he abruptly gave up making assemblages, a decision he later explained by stating, "I didn't want to glue anything down anymore."⁹⁸ His practice shifted away from the production of static sculptural objects, and towards more ephemeral, mutable (and thus less commercially viable) forms like filmmaking, drawing, and live performance, media better suited to his burgeoning psychedelic aesthetic.

Conner's trip to Mexico may have begun as a fear-induced flight from the mushroom cloud, but it drew him towards an entirely different variety of mushroom: the hallucinogenic *psilocybin*. In contrast to the physical destruction symbolized by the atomic bomb, psychotropic drugs offered a more liberating and revelatory—even creative—form of destruction aimed at dismantling the boundaries of everyday perception and the constraints of the individual ego: the so-called "ego-death" precipitated by psychedelic experience and its accompanying dissociative states. Conner's experiences with hallucinogens, along with his newfound acceptance of death as inevitable, precipitated an artistic re-birth and maturation that freed him from the yoke of external expectations (especially commercial ones) and allowed him to embark on a newly visionary, "expanded" chapter in his practice.

Though Conner began experimenting with "chemical transformations"—including peyote and hashish—sometime in the mid-1950s, he had been fascinated by altered states of consciousness much longer still. While taking peyote in 1958, Conner recalled a visionary experience from early adolescence:

It was when I was about eleven years old. I was in my room in the house in late afternoon. Sun was shining through the window. I was lying on the floor and I was looking out

⁹⁸ Karlstrom, Oral History Interview with Bruce Conner.

across the rug at the light on the floor. I went into a state of consciousness which I couldn't describe afterwards. I changed. I changed physically, I changed conceptually, and it took hundreds of years. I changed and grew old, through all kinds of experiences, in worlds of totally different dimensions. And then I became aware of myself being in the room. Here I am, in a room, and I'm enormously old. How can I ever get up? I'm practically disintegrated. I'm an ancient person. My bones are falling apart. I can't move. And then I slowly become aware of the rug. I look at my hands and they're not old. I knew I was an old, ancient person, but I didn't look that way. I didn't understand what had happened and I wanted to talk to someone about it. I couldn't. There weren't words to describe the experience. The only thing I could think of saying was that it was like a dream. It wasn't a dream, but very real. It wasn't science fiction. There were so many things that were unknown secrets, secrets that adult society knew, that they didn't let children know about. I thought this was one of them.⁹⁹

Conner's childhood vision involved a rupturing of continuous, progressive space and time, leading to a mystical, dream-like experience where his coherent conceptions of himself and his surroundings completely unraveled. Though his memories of it resurfaced while under the influence of peyote, the original experience was evidently spontaneous, and unaided by chemicals.¹⁰⁰

Conner's experiments with peyote were not always so revelatory and positive; he also experienced "bad trips" accompanied by dark, harrowing visions. While living in Mexico in February 1962, Conner was visited by Walter Hopps, the Los Angeles-based curator and founder of the Ferus Gallery, where Conner frequently exhibited. Hopps and Conner decided to take peyote and "excavate" at the site of ancient ruins on land owned by Hopps's relatives, located in the countryside south of Mexico City. The pair of amateur archaeologists uncovered some small artifacts, and even a human skeleton. According to Hopps, the peyote took its toll on Conner:

⁹⁹ This quote is used as the epigraph for the *2000 B.C.* exhibition catalogue.

¹⁰⁰ Cummings, Oral history interview with Bruce Conner. During high school, Conner continued his investigation into mystical knowledge by poring through books on occult practices—alchemy, magic, witchcraft, and cosmology—fascinated not only by the secret wisdom that they promised to reveal, and even more for the dazzling iconography and mysterious symbolism of the accompanying illustrations. Conner often cited these books as an influence on the development of his mature graphic style after 1962; for instance, his meticulous pen-and-ink drawings of mandalas, or the dazzlingly intricate *23 KENWOOD AVE.*, both discussed later in this chapter.

“Stoned, he had visions and thought strange things were going on in the night sky, winged beings coming after him and so on.”¹⁰¹ In a letter written to Michael McClure immediately following the experience, Conner wrote: “Walter Hopps and I went to dig on a pyramid the night of [February] 3-4. It was a tough night for me...I went through hell. Mexico is a nut. There are crosses everywhere and pyramids (triangles).”¹⁰² These comments point to Conner’s understanding of Mexico as a site of discovery, both historical and perceptual; an ancient and confounding landscape—“a nut”—inscribed with symbolic forms, like crosses, pyramids, triangles. Above all, for Conner, Mexico’s mysteries were bound up with the mysteries of psychedelic experience—its physical geography was fused with the psychic geography of expanded consciousness.

Years before Conner ventured to Mexico, botanists and anthropologists had been analyzing the chemistry and cultural significance of peyote, the *psilocybin* mushroom, and other naturally occurring psychotropic substances. Many credit a single amateur mycologist, Robert Gordon Wasson, with bringing Mexico’s “sacred mushrooms” to the attention of the American public in the late 1950s. Unlike Conner or Hopps, Wasson did not possess any avant-garde credentials—a former vice president of J.P. Morgan Chase, he and his wife Valentina Wasson, a pediatrician, began researching wild mushrooms as a hobby. During the 1950s, they conducted regular site visits to rural villages in southern Mexico, taking part in religious rituals involving the mushrooms that were led by indigenous shamans, or, *curanderos*. Wasson recounted his first experience in a traditional Mazatec ceremony in an essay called “Seeking the Magic Mushroom,” published in *LIFE* in May 1957.¹⁰³ To Wasson’s dismay, the essay fueled the trend of American

¹⁰¹ See Hopps, “Bruce Conner.”

¹⁰² Bruce Conner, letter to Michael McClure, dated February 12, 1962, The Bruce Conner Papers, BANC MSS 2000/50c, Carton 1, Folder 1, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

¹⁰³ The Wassons are often credited with founding the subfield of ethnomycology, the study of mushrooms’ roles in world cultures. R. Gordon Wasson, “Seeking the Magic Mushroom,” *Life Magazine* no. 13 (May 1957): 100–120.

“mushroom-seekers” travelling to Mexico, and thus inadvertently helped spark the psychedelic revolution of the 1960s.¹⁰⁴ Wasson was especially critical of Timothy Leary, whom he regarded as “vain and superficial” and “reckless,” yet, somewhat ironically, it was Wasson’s *LIFE* essay that informed Leary’s decision to travel to Cuernavaca, Mexico, in the summer of 1960, where he ingested mushrooms under the supervision of a *curandera*, or female shaman.¹⁰⁵ Leary would later cite this experience as an important milestone on his path to becoming a leading proponent of psychedelics.¹⁰⁶

American artists and writers also conducted their own “research” in Mexico.¹⁰⁷ During the late 1940s through the early 1960s, most of the major writers and poets of the Beat

¹⁰⁴ According to botanist Gastón Guzmán, “Before the publication of Wasson’s *LIFE* article in May 1957, the effects of consuming sacred mushrooms were almost unknown outside of certain Mexican cults that used them for religious purposes.” Guzmán, “Wasson and the Development of Mycology in Mexico,” in *The Sacred Mushroom Seeker: Essays for R. Gordon Wasson*, Thomas J. Riedlinger, ed. (Portland, OR: Dioscorides Press, 1990), 92. Peter T. Furst notes that Wasson contributed to the development of synthetic psychedelics when in early 1960, he shipped large quantities of psilocybin seeds to Dr. Albert Hoffmann, the Swiss chemist who had synthesized the first batch of lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD-25, in 1938. See Peter T. Furst, “‘Vistas Beyond the Horizon of This Life’: Encounters with R. Gordon Wasson,” in *The Sacred Mushroom Seeker: Essays for R. Gordon Wasson*, Thomas J. Riedlinger, ed. (Portland, OR: Dioscorides Press, 1990), 74-75.

¹⁰⁵ For Wasson’s remarks on Leary, see Thomas J. Riedlinger, “A Latecomer’s View of R. Gordon Wasson,” *The Sacred Mushroom Seeker: Essays for R. Gordon Wasson*, Thomas J. Riedlinger, ed. (Portland, OR: Dioscorides Press, 1990), 211. Riedlinger cites numerous sources that pinpoint Wasson’s article in *LIFE* as a major catalyst for the psychedelic counterculture. They include: John Marks, *The Search for the “Manchurian Candidate”* (New York: Dell, 1979); Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams: The CIA, LSD, and the Sixties Rebellion* (New York: Grove Press, 1985); and Jay Stevens, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987).

¹⁰⁶ After completing his first year as a lecturer in clinical psychology at Harvard University, Leary travelled to Cuernavaca where he was given *psilocybin* mushrooms by a *curandera* named Juana. Leary was encouraged to make the trip by a friend who had recently done so after reading Wasson’s essay. In his 1968 autobiography, *High Priest*, Leary described his first experience with mushrooms in the form of a free-verse poem. Underlying Leary’s use of poetic form, which was partially influenced by his close friendship with Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, is the notion that psychedelic experience cannot be communicated through everyday vocabulary. For more on Leary and Ginsberg’s relationship and the origins of psychedelic counterculture, see Peter Connors, *White Hand Society: The Psychedelic Partnership of Timothy Leary and Allen Ginsberg* (San Francisco, City Lights Books: 2010); for information specifically on Leary’s 1960 trip to Mexico, see pages 46-53.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Albright, an influential art critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and author of an authoritative history of postwar art in the Bay Area, notes: “Mexican culture had an especially deep attraction for the Beat artists of the 1950s. They admired its tenuous balance of violent extremes--the events of everyday life shading into the occult, the natural landscape intensifying into the peyote vision, with its insight that all existence is sacred but not necessarily solemn.” Thomas Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-1980: An Illustrated History* (Berkeley, CA:

Generation—including Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, and Phillip Lamantia—resided or travelled in Mexico, as a kind of artistic rite-of-passage.¹⁰⁸ Mexico was of particular importance to the artists and writers affiliated with Wallace Berman, the assemblage artist and publisher of the avant-garde journal, *Semina*. For instance, the assemblage artist George Herms lived in Mexico City for a brief period in winter 1954; soon after returning to Los Angeles, Herms befriended Berman and began making assemblages.¹⁰⁹ In 1959, Berman dedicated an entire issue of *Semina* to the theme of Mexico and psychedelics, including excerpts from Antonin Artaud’s writings on the indigenous peyote cults alongside peyote-inspired poetry by McClure, Lamantia, and David Meltzer, another San Francisco Beat poet.¹¹⁰

According to religious studies scholar John Lardas, mythical notions of the Mexican landscape played a pivotal role in the Beat imaginary, especially for Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsberg, for whom Mexico symbolized both “a land of Edenic innocence” and “an ominous portent of America’s future,” a simultaneous vision of a distant, pre-modern past and a post-

University of California Press, 1985), 83. Albright’s association between the Mexican landscape and psychedelic vision was a cornerstone of Conner’s own perspective on Mexico, one that I unpack in the following pages.

¹⁰⁸ The Connors often socialized with Lamantia in Mexico City during this period. See Hatch, 85, and Author’s Interview with Jean Conner.

¹⁰⁹ Herms recalls his time in Mexico as a turning-point in his development as an artist. See Paul Karlstrom, Oral History Interview with George Herms, December 10, 1993, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-george-herms-12275>.

¹¹⁰ One major source for the Beat poets’ fascination with Mexico was Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), the French poet, playwright, and actor, best known for his concept of the “Theatre of Cruelty.” In 1936, Artaud traveled through the Mexican countryside to participate in the peyote rituals of the indigenous Tarahumaran peoples, which he described in his essay “Journey to the Land of the Tarahumara.” Artaud was a major influence on the postwar avant-garde, and, as art historian Lucy Bradnock argues, he was also a major influence on both Berman and Conner, especially in the late 1950s during their assemblage phase. See Lucy Bradnock, “Artaud and the Pathological Mode in the Work of Wallace Berman and Bruce Conner,” unpublished paper presented at College Art Association Conference, Los Angeles, February 2009.

apocalyptic future, ancient heaven and modern hell.¹¹¹ Lardas argues that the Beats regarded Mexico not simply as enchanted terrain where they could entertain fantasies of absolute freedom, take drugs, and live free from financial burdens, but moreover as an “experiential landscape” and “ritual testing ground,” where creative energies could catalyze. For these writers, traveling to Mexico constituted an artistic pilgrimage, or in Lardas’s words: “an imaginative journey that would crystallize [their] understanding of America.”¹¹² These writers desired more than just a utopian escape—they ventured to Mexico in search of a clearer understanding of modern American society, and what they perceived as its impending historical decline. For this postwar generation of male writers who were deeply preoccupied with what it meant to be American, Mexico offered a zone of radical otherness—linguistically, racially, and culturally—that paradoxically, would allow them to better understand themselves.

The Beats envisioned Mexico as a liminal zone characterized by otherness or “betweenness”—as both part of “the Americas” but subaltern to the U.S., geographically and historically on the fringes of Western modernity yet utterly subject to its contingencies. For these outsiders, Mexico signified neither utopia or dystopia, but instead, “heterotopia,” in the sense described by Michel Foucault. In his 1967 essay, “On Other Spaces,” Foucault describes heterotopias as “counter-sites” that operate outside of and in opposition to all other spaces. He distinguishes heterotopias from utopias, defined as fundamentally unreal, impossible spaces, with no actual location; by contrast, heterotopias are actual spaces with real locations in the world. Foucault links heterotopic “other spaces” with slices of time “when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time,” a temporal mode that he terms “heterochronic.” He provides multiple

¹¹¹ John Lardas, *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001): 180; see 180-186 for more on the Beats and Mexico.

¹¹² Lardas, 184.

examples of heterotopic spaces, including boats, saunas, gardens, museums and libraries, even decorative carpets (bringing to mind the location of childhood Conner's hallucination).

Foucault's pre-eminent example of heterotopic space is the cemetery, which, he states is "a highly heterotopic place since, for the individual, the cemetery begins with this strange heterochrony, the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance."¹¹³ Heterotopic space is thus linked to non-normative, non-teleological, "quasi-eternal" time, or "heterochrony," a time that is governed by the body's eventual "dissolution and disappearance," its physical death. Thus, Foucault links heterotopic space and heterochronic time to the transitional state between existence and deacease, a state that is demarcated by the cemetery, the space where the living and the dead co-mingle.

By imagining Mexico as a kind of subaltern counter-site to the United States, the Beats cast it, in Foucaultian terms, as a heterotopia: an "other space" that operates against the grain, resistant to the forward thrust of linear time and the ordinary functioning of normative, everyday spaces. Like his Beat contemporaries, Conner similarly imagined Mexico as a heterotopia, a landscape that was culturally and geographically aligned with death, and with the altered temporalities—the "heterochrony"—of psychedelic experience. Just as Foucault designates the cemetery as an exemplary heterotopia due to its liminal position between life and death, for Conner, Mexico functioned as a death-zone, a place where death is valorized, even worshipped, where poverty and precarity characterized everyday life, where crosses and ancient ruins provide constant reminders of human finitude.

Thus, for Conner, the major features of the Mexican heterotopography were, on one hand, the omnipresence and celebration of mortality, and on the other, his own personal pursuit of

¹¹³ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias (1967)." Accessed at: <http://www.foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heterotopia.en.html>

psychedelic experience, “the trip,” metonymically embodied by peyote buttons and magic mushrooms. The psychedelic “ego-death” is in a sense aligned with the heterotopic spatial logic of liminality—to “trip” is to take a temporary detour from the everyday self, while remaining conscious and alive. Yet, since psychedelic experience originates in perception rather than in the external, phenomenological world (i.e. it is a temporal experience more than a spatial one) it is better characterized as an entrance into heterochronic time: a sublime “all at once-ness,” out of sync with the measured flow of clock-time and the sequential logic of progressive history. Foucault’s theoretical terminology thus helps unpack the shared logic of the psychic and geographic “trips” that Conner experienced during his year in Mexico.

A group of three Conner drawings from 1962-1963 illustrates the shared heterogeneous logic of these “trips,” while also reflecting their resistance to representation. Conner himself described his drawing practice during this period as an attempt at “making a crude map of references to ways you could conceive of experience,” and of “trying to convey on paper a route within my own consciousness.”¹¹⁴ Two of these drawings, *UNA MAPA* and *MUSHROOM*, are from the “Hecho en Mexico” (Made in Mexico) series, produced during Conner’s final month in Mexico in 1962; both operate as highly personal maps that navigate through an imaginary “trip” through the Mexican landscape. The first, *UNA MAPA* (fig. 2.1), is a labyrinthine treasure map that designates two landmarks: a cluster of large, stalky mushrooms, shown sprouting up from

¹¹⁴ Barry Schwabsky includes these Conner quotes in an essay on Conner’s 1960s drawing practice. Schwabsky states: “The drawings done in Wichita in 1963 concern neither objects (and their evanescence) nor even environments (and their possibility) but rather, as some are titled, landscape: place, geography, or territory in some broader sense. With regard to these drawings, Conner speaks of ‘making a crude map of references to ways you could conceive of experience’ and of ‘trying to convey on paper a route within my own consciousness.’ An internal as much as an external terrain, then. But what’s curious is how these drawings tend to combine, synthesize, or perhaps just superimpose ‘view’ and ‘map.’ These landscapes are always seen both from within and without.” Barry Schwabsky, *Bruce Conner Drawings Volume I: 1960 to 1968* (Los Angeles, CA: Kohn Turner Gallery, 1999), 16. Although Conner apparently made these remarks specifically in reference his Wichita drawings from 1963, a group that includes the drawing *MUSHROOM CLOUD* that is discussed below, his comments speak to his overall conceptualization of his graphic work from this period, and are especially relevant to earlier works like *UNA MAPA* and *MUSHROOM* that closely resemble maps.

the base of a large cross, the Christian symbol of sacrifice and redemption, but which also denotes the more specific geographic location of a church graveyard—a consummate heterotopia. The role of these landmarks is to help guide the viewer to the hidden “treasure” of mystical experience and esoteric knowledge, and yet, they mystify more than they reveal. Adjacent to this cluster of symbols, or more accurately, clues, Conner suggests “DIG HERE,” although the proverbial “X” marking the spot is located on the opposite side of the page—a misleading deictic, and inevitably, a dead end.

The second drawing, MUSHROOM (fig. 2.2-2.3), also presents a kind of map, in this case, a detailed topography of the magic mushroom itself. As in UNA MAPA, the surface of this landscape is littered with strange shapes that resemble microorganisms and biological phenomena, like veins, cells, or bacteria. These mysterious forms compel the viewer to shift between conflicting scales and registers of experience: inside vs. outside; surface vs. depth; the universal vs. the particular; nature vs. culture; the miniscule vs. the vast. Yet again, the map charts a journey but lacks a final destination—rather, it invites you to get lost in the labyrinthine patterns of formal play, more like a game than a picture.

A third drawing that Conner completed the following year while living in Wichita, MUSHROOM CLOUD (1963) (fig. 2.4), captures the serene beauty of an atomic bomb explosion. The explosion occurs in a nondescript, vacant landscape, its billowing clouds of smoke swelling outwards in a dense lattice of hatch-marks, just like those seen in the “Made in Mexico” drawings, yet here, the mushroom has morphed from the fungal to the atomic variety. Conner’s rendering of the cloud is graceful and intricate, yet unnerving in its beauty. Like in the previous drawings, this landscape is another “other” space, a “nowhere” in which the blast has no victims; isolated and abstract, the atomic explosion exists here as a purely aesthetic event.

When viewed as a series, these drawings indicate Conner's preoccupation with, on the one hand, the perception-altering qualities of the psychedelic mushroom, and the other, the apocalyptic fallout of the atomic bomb. The consistencies in his graphic style suggest that Conner conceptualized these phenomena as part of a continuum of sublime experience, ranging from the physiological to the psychological, the beautiful to the terrifying, the monumental to the microscopic—and, importantly, as events unfolding in heterotopic “other spaces,” outside of and in opposition to, the functioning of everyday space and time.

Conner's enthusiasm about the curative and psychological possibilities of magic mushrooms is once again indicated in the letter to Lee Streiff mentioned in the previous chapter, in which Conner describes the recent completion of his “subliminal” film, *COSMIC RAY*. On the bottom half of the page, Conner includes a sketch of a mythical creature, half-woman, half-caterpillar, donning an elaborate headdress and gazing out towards an amorphous shape that vaguely resembles a cartographic depiction of an island or peninsula (fig. 2.5). This Lewis Carroll-esque creature reclines in the shade underneath a large magic mushroom, which emits tiny crosses and squiggles from its cap. Beneath her is a pyramid-like formation emblazoned with shapes and symbols that vaguely recall Mesoamerican glyphs, an elaboration of the Mexican symbolism he described in his letter to McClure: crosses, pyramids, and triangles. Like *UNA MAPA* and *MUSHROOM*, this sketch suggests that, for Conner, Mexico represented a heterotopic terrain that was intimately bound up with the heterochronic possibilities of psychedelic experience.

The text of the letter attests to Conner's enthusiasm for psychedelics, through references to recent scientific research on peyote, and on the ideal season to go hunting for mushrooms. Conner writes:

My color film has been cut up and some of it thrown away and I haven't used my movie camera since last summer. They have some special mushrooms grown some 150 miles from here that we will go to taste when the rainy season starts. U. of Arizona has discovered that Peyote produces an anti-biotic which will kill bacteria that penicillin [sic], aureomycin and other such drugs can not destroy. So—the stories of Peyote as a cure-all...¹¹⁵

The “color film” that Conner mentions refers to footage of San Francisco street scenes that he shot in 1959 with Bob Branaman, and later incorporated into the first version of LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS. This film represents Conner's first attempt to map the overlapping terrain of the Mexican landscape and psychedelic experience by maximizing the phenomenological possibilities of the cinematic medium.¹¹⁶

LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS: The Retinal Circus

Though LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS is ostensibly about a single “trip,” it actually documents a series of excursions that Bruce and Jean Conner made into the isolated,

¹¹⁵ The final sentence of the letter trails off after striking an optimistic note about peyote's curative effects. Another sentence written vertically along the left-hand margin states: “We will probably be in TAW with a baby in November.” Conner predicts returning to Wichita [TAW] with a newborn baby in November, indicating that the letter was likely written sometime in spring 1962, when Jean Conner was in the early stages of pregnancy. This chronology fits with Conner's reference to the “rainy season” when wild mushrooms flourish in the Mexican countryside, which typically lasts between early summer and early fall, around May through September. Undated letter to Lee Streiff, The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Re-printed in *Bruce Conner On Drugs (and art)*, a limited edition hand-printed book with an introduction by Bancroft librarian Dean Smith, published by The Bancroft Library Press, University of California, Berkeley, in 2011. The full text of the letter is reprinted in Appendix 2.

¹¹⁶ Robert Branaman is an artist who currently resides in Santa Monica, CA. Like Conner, he was born in 1933 and raised in Wichita, Kansas, where he became involved in the second wave of Beat writers and artists who called themselves the “Wichita Vortex” (see Chapter One for Conner's connections to the Vortex's first wave). After moving to San Francisco with his first wife, Beth Pewther (who stars in COSMIC RAY), Branaman collaborated with Conner on multiple film projects, including filming the San Francisco street scenes seen in LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS. Branaman gradually established himself as a notable West Coast underground filmmaker with films like *Big Sur Movie* (1964), and *Night Lights & Day Hi's* (1964-1965), which use experimental camera techniques like superimposition and improvised rapid-cuts to imitate the visual experience on psychedelics. Branaman's films are difficult to view today because he made few screening prints, preferring to show original prints until they deteriorated or were lost. His early renown within the underground film community is indicated by his inclusion in Sheldon Renan's landmark 1967 book on the American underground, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York, E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc: 1967), 127-129.

mountainous regions surrounding Mexico City. In a somewhat cryptic description of the film that he often supplied to film programs and distribution catalogues, Conner called it “a famous documentary containing full information. Special effects by Isauro Nava, Rancho del Cura, Huatla de Jiminez, Mexico [sic].”¹¹⁷ Here, Conner actually credits the *curandero* who was responsible for providing him with magic mushrooms, Isauro Nava, and even names the man’s village, Rancho El Cura (misidentified as “del Cura”). At the invitation of Timothy Leary, Nava guided a small group of *gringos* (including Beth Pewther, the dancer seen in COSMIC RAY) through a mushroom ritual at the Conners’ Mexico City apartment in August 1962, documented in a photograph that was likely taken by Conner (fig. 2.6). Nava’s presence, it seems, was of crucial significance to Conner, as a guarantor of an authentic psychedelic experience.

By attributing the film’s “special effects” to the indigenous shaman, and by extension, the rural landscape from which he and his mushrooms hailed, Conner emphasized the dual importance of psychedelic experience and the Mexican geography in LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS. Somewhat cheekily, he also describes the film a “famous documentary containing full information,” even though this “fullness” refers more to its sensory excess than its factual clarity or narrative unity. Though stylistically, LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS is more impressionistic than realist, and its merits as a “documentary” are dubious, it does trace the

¹¹⁷ Huautla de Jiménez is the name of a municipality located in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, about two hundred miles south of Mexico City. Mushrooms thrive in Huautla de Jiménez during the rainy season, and indeed, Wasson conducted much of his ethnomycological research in this region. In July 1958, about a year after Wasson’s article was published in *LIFE*, a young Mexican botanist and colleague of Wasson’s, Gastón Guzmán, travelled to Huautla de Jiménez with the intention of taking psilocybin mushrooms. Guzmán recounts that his “guide” for this experience was a multilingual Mazatec Indian shaman named Don Isauro Nava, who lived in a remote village called Rancho El Cura, located about an hour by foot from central Huautla de Jiménez. Guzmán described Isauro Nava as “an intelligent, bilingual Mazatec Indian,” who guided him through his first experience with psilocybin mushrooms in 1958. See Gastón Guzmán, “Wasson and the Development of Mycology in Mexico,” *The Sacred Mushroom Seeker: Essays for R. Gordon Wasson*, Thomas J. Riedlinger, ed. (Portland, OR: Dioscorides Press, 1990), 92. Elsewhere, in promotional materials for LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS, the description states “Filmed in San Francisco, California, San Pedro Tenancingo [sic], Mexico, and Newton Center [sic], Massachusetts.” Tenancingo is a municipality about sixty-five miles south of Mexico City, and may have been one of the places that Conner filmed during his travels around the countryside.

parallel trajectories of two concomitant “trips.” The film is inherently hybrid and heterogenous, fusing discrete genres—documentary, travelogue, abstract film-poem, flicker film, even “music video”—just as it fuses the senses into a synaesthetic spectacle of color and form, pattern and rhythm, image and sound (fig. 2.7).

Torrential and lightning-fast, the montage contains a barrage of quick cuts that burst from the screen like an optical blitz. In the words of Bruce Jenkins, *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* “exhibits a childlike fascination with primary colors, with textures and patterns, with flowers and trees, and, equally, with the built and unbuilt environments,” by combining “images of brightly colored geometric shapes, richly colored textiles, advertising posters, and a virtual menagerie of emblems and logos.”¹¹⁸ The camera’s gaze is at once extraordinarily attentive to these fleeting details of the visual field, and yet instantly and perpetually distracted by new stimuli.

The opening moments feature a multicolored display of women’s shoes, which rapidly cuts to shots of signs and flowers—here, the location appears to be San Francisco, since the flowers were reportedly filmed in the city’s famed Golden Gate Park.¹¹⁹ Next, we are transported to a rural Mexican village where we encounter peasant women and children, decrepit buildings, and a group of men playing with illustrated playing cards that are emblazoned with mysterious symbolism, resembling the iconic images of the Tarot deck. The titular mushrooms appear fleetingly towards the end of the film’s first minute, when a collection of freshly-picked fungal specimens are examined by two pairs of hands, one belonging to a male in a black shirt and pants, the other featuring delicate fingers and carrying a purse—most likely, the hands of Jean Conner (fig. 2.8).

¹¹⁸ Jenkins, “Explosion in a Film Factory: The Cinema of Bruce Conner,” 214.

¹¹⁹ Kevin Hatch states that Golden Gate Park is the location for the floral imagery seen in the film, though he provides no source for this observation. Hatch, 153.

After the mushrooms appear, the pace of the film becomes increasingly frenetic, and its pursuit of visual correspondences between forms and textures is practically manic. At one point, we see an overexposed image of a smiling Jean Conner, bathed in an aura of hazy sunlight. Thereafter, the mushroom hunting party appears to have departed the rural village and entered an even more remote area, where the camera freely peruses the forest, the mountainside, and passers-by on the dirt roads. The film reaches a visual crescendo with a luminous fireworks display, which Conner shot using multiple exposures to produce a shimmering, multilayered constellation of explosive illumination (fig. 2.9). As Stan Brakhage notes in his profile of Conner in *Film at Wit's End*, these explosions in the sky offer a festive substitution for a far more ominous spectacle of exploding light and heat—the atomic blast and its ballooning mushroom cloud.¹²⁰ During the film's climax, Conner playfully uses stop-motion to create rapidly syncopated imagery of graphic signs, a breakfast platter with a waffle and a fried egg, rapidly-blinking streetlights, and the abstract geometry of white lines on black pavement, signaling the triumph of visual pleasure and rhythmic patterns over signification and meaning.

LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS's carnivalesque opticality recalls the rich textual ekphrasis offered in "The Retinal Circus," a section from Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner and Richard Alpert's 1964 book *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*.¹²¹ The book takes its inspiration from the *Bardo Thodol*, or the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, an eighth-century Buddhist funerary text that instructs the reader on how to prepare for death and subsequent reincarnation. Leary et al. adapted the *Bardo*'s principles into a kind of

¹²⁰ Stan Brakhage, *Film at Wit's End: Eight Avant-Garde Filmmakers* (McPherson & Company, 1989), 142. Brakhage also notes the prevalence of round forms in the film, suggesting that they are meant to evoke the shape of mushrooms tops and peyote buttons.

¹²¹ Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1964). Conner's disagreement with the book's approach is discussed later in this chapter.

reference manual for people taking psychedelics, who undergo a process akin to death when they experience a severing from the ego. “The Retinal Circus” refers to the hallucinogenic phase of a trip, which the authors describe as “chaotic, beautiful, thrilling, incomprehensible, magical, ever-changing,” featuring feelings of “ecstatic freedom,” the synaesthetic fusion of the senses, and a ludic perceptual interplay of forms and symbols. This heady description is strikingly reminiscent of the optical play and synaesthetic unification of the senses enacted in *LOOKING FOR*

MUSHROOMS:

Ecstatic freedom of consciousness is the keynote of this vision. Exploration of unimagined realms. Theatrical adventures. Plays within plays within plays. Symbols change into things symbolized and vice versa. Words become things, thoughts are music, music is smelled, sounds are touched, complete interchangeability of the senses. All things are possible. All feelings are possible. A person may “try on” various moods like so many pieces of clothing. Subjects and objects whirl, transform, change into each other, merge, fuse, disperse again. External objects dance and sing. The mind plays upon them as upon a musical instrument. They assume any form, significance or quality upon command. They are admired, adored, analyzed, examined, changed, made beautiful or ugly, large or small, important or trivial, useful, dangerous, magical or incomprehensible. They may be reacted to with wonder, amazement, humor, veneration, love, disgust, fascination, horror, delight, fear, ecstasy.

This phenomenological description of the retinal circus—“Subjects and objects whirl, transform, merge, fuse, disperse again”—immediately evokes the visual acrobatics and chaotic rhythms of Conner’s film. Likewise, its description of the mercurial temperament that accompanies the experience, wherein the material world is alternately “admired, adored, analyzed...” and so on, until it appears “magical or incomprehensible,” also captures the ambivalent tone of *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*, which immerses the viewer in an environment that seems at once familiar and foreign, fascinating and bewildering, at times delightful, at others, repellent. They continue:

Like a computer with unlimited access to any programs, the mind roams freely. Personal and racial memories bubble up to the surface of consciousness, interplay with fantasies, wishes, dreams and external objects. A present event becomes charged with profound

emotional significance, a cosmic phenomenon becomes identical with some personal quirk. Metaphysical problems are juggled and bounced around [...] spontaneous outpouring of association, opposites merging, images fusing, condensing, shifting, collapsing, expanding, merging, connecting. This kaleidoscopic vision of game-reality may be frightening and confusing to an ill-prepared subject. Instead of exquisite clarity of many-leveled perception, he will experience a confused chaos of uncontrollable, meaningless forms. Instead of delight at the playful acrobatics of the free intellect, there will be anxious clinging to an elusive order. Morbid and scatological hallucinations may occur, evoking disgust and shame.

The authors' description of a "kaleidoscopic vision of game-reality" recalls the film's kaleidoscopic visual effects, especially dizzying in the scenes of a flower garden (another Foucaultian heterotopia), the sparkling multiple-exposures of fireworks displays, as well as the many visual "games" Conner plays with graphic matches, rhythmic patterns, and even a literal card game being played by Mexican villagers. Here, the language used to describe the new depths of human consciousness, perception, and the well of "metaphysical problems" that are brought to light by the psychedelic experience, are also reminiscent of Conner's narration of his childhood mystical experience, in which he underwent a cosmic process of aging and reincarnation.

"The Retinal Circus" concludes with the following sentences:

As before, this negative vision occurs only if the person attempts to control or rationalize the magic panorama. Relax and accept whatever comes. Remember that all visions are created by your mind, the happy and the unhappy, the beautiful and the ugly, the delightful and the horrifying. Your consciousness is creator, performer and spectator of the "retinal circus."¹²²

"The Retinal Circus" thus encompasses an exceptional, all-consuming perceptual experience that verges precariously on the sublime. The paradoxical experience of the "beautiful and the ugly, the delightful and the horrifying" become fused into an unmanageable, overwhelming, irrational "magic panorama" of visual spectacle. This symphony of psychedelic vocabulary captures the

¹²² Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1964).

immersive, symphonic visual experience of *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*, which similarly attempts to chart a “trip,” but without the explicit prescriptions offered by Leary’s tract.

Given that Conner’s Mexican trip was motivated by the atomic threat, his psychedelic aesthetic is best understood as an artistic negotiation of the existential anxieties provoked by the atomic bomb, and thus, represents the emergence of a new, more mature phase in his “atomic sublime” aesthetic. Conner’s strategy in facing this crisis was to expand his physical and mental territory, by mining the possibilities offered by the Mexican landscape and psychedelic experience—liminal zones poised on the brink between life and death—unfamiliar, precarious, and radically “other” to normative discursive practices of space and time. By confronting mortality head-on in Mexico, Conner was able to finally reconcile the opposing drives of *Eros* and *Thanatos*; his emergent psychedelic aesthetic reflects this synthesis.

Conner completed the first, silent version of *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* in 1965 after settling back to San Francisco. Splicing together the San Francisco street scenes shot by Branaman in 1959 with footage from his Mexican travels, Conner condensed the film down to one hundred feet, head spliced to tail, so that it could be continuously projected at 16 fps on an endless-loop cartridge attachment to a Technicolor projector. The result was a condensed montage of under three minutes of color footage (100 ft/2:45 min), continuously looped as if to replicate the seemingly infinite duration of a trip.¹²³

Two years later, Conner gave the film its first soundtrack: The Beatles’ “Tomorrow Never Knows,” the final track on their 1966 album *Revolver*, widely considered a masterpiece of psychedelic rock & roll.¹²⁴ John Lennon reportedly wrote the song after reading *The Psychedelic*

¹²³ See Brian L. Frye, “Looking for Mushrooms,” accessed at: http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/cteq/04/looking_for_mushrooms.html.

¹²⁴ The Beatles are often credited with borrowing experimental techniques from the avant-garde—from *mosque*

Experience while under the influence of LSD. Lennon borrowed lyrics from the text, directly incorporating the famous line: “turn off your mind, relax, float downstream,” Leary’s advice on how to avoid a “bad trip”:

*Turn off your mind relax and float down stream
It is not dying, it is not dying
Lay down all thoughts, surrender to the void,
It is shining, it is shining.*

*Yet you may see the meaning of within
It is being, it is being*

*Love is all and love is everyone
It is knowing, it is knowing*

*And ignorance and hate may mourn the dead
It is believing, it is believing*

*But listen to the color of your dreams
It is not living, it is not living*

*Or play the game "Existence" to the end
Of the beginning, of the beginning*

The Beatles, “Tomorrow Never Knows” (1966)

When describing his use of continuous looped projection, Conner often invoked a modified version of the song’s final echoing lyrics—instead of “to the end, of the beginning,” Conner used the phrase: “no end of the beginning.” Sometime after completing the sound edit, Conner sent Lennon a print of the film along with a series of limited-edition “cards” featuring poetry by Michael McClure and Conner’s offset lithographs of mandala drawings. Lennon demonstrated his approval of *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* with a quirky “fan letter,”

concrète to John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen—and adapting them for pop music. *Revolver* includes groundbreaking use of “backmasking” and tape loops, which became emblematic of psychedelic rock sound.

adorned with a drawing by Lennon's young son, Julian (fig. 2.10).¹²⁵

LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS harnesses the immersive character of cinematic spectatorship to recreate the “special effects” of a psychedelic experience. And yet, as a visual representation of an ineffable psychological state, Conner's film is inherently simulacral. Likewise, “Tomorrow Never Knows” deploys the immersive medium of sound as a means to simulating a “trip,” though its mimetic capacity is destined to fall short. Nevertheless, this chain of appropriations—Conner's borrowing of Lennon's song, Lennon's borrowing of Leary's text, aligns these three men as major cultural forces in the development of the psychedelic counterculture.

Thirty years later in 1995, Conner released a new sound version of LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS, accompanied by a minimalist composition, Terry Riley's “Poppy Nogood and the Phantom Band” (1968). Conner optically printed five additional frames for each frame of the original footage, elongating the film from its initial two-minute, forty-seven second running time to a full fourteen minutes. In the 1999 exhibition at the Walker Arts Center, *2000 B.C.*, Conner exhibited this version of LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS as an interactive sculpture, threading a print on a Moviscope viewer for museum patrons to view on their own—in homage to the continual loop projection he had first envisioned in 1965. Each version of the film marks an evolution in its temporal and spatial possibilities—from the rapid-fire “retinal circus” of the three-minute version, to the protracted duration of the more meditative, but equally hypnotic fourteen-minute sequel.

¹²⁵ Lennon's letter to Conner first appeared in a 1969 issue of *Canyon Cinemanews*, and is reprinted in Scott MacDonald's *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* (University of California Press, Berkeley: 2008): 122.

LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS' multiple versions and often competing temporalities—densely compressed, exponentially stretched, and infinitely looped—recalls film critic Parker Tyler's description of the opposing temporalities of Andy Warhol's early films. In his 1967 essay, "Dragtime and Drugtime: or, Film à la Warhol," Tyler discusses two opposed film temporalities: "dragtime," the monotonous, distended duration in which time seems to "drag" rather than progress—and "drug time," the hypnotic, enhanced temporality associated with psychedelic drugs. Tyler explores the ways in which Warhol's films propose a relationship between these two distinct temporal modes in his description of *Empire* (1964), a film comprised of a continuous shot of the Empire State Building that runs for over eight hours:

When, for example, we are asked by *Empire* to watch the famous landmark ("the world's tallest") standing quite motionless, with the camera equally unmoving, while the sun is allowed to take all of eight hours to go down and come up, we are being asked to submit ourselves to an endurance test; that is, to the opposite of an entertainment form...unless (which is, I think, the point) it should occur to us that this quantitative time, spreading out its minutes in a morgue, is merely the abstract proposition for a much more entertaining, specifically psychedelic time. The latter provides a decisive change not in the object, but in the one viewing it. Drugtime is the other pole of dragtime.¹²⁶

Though they represent polar opposites of the temporal spectrum, both "dragtime" and "drugtime" do not correspond to the methodical, progressive tempo of clock-time. In both the horizontally extended temporality of dragtime, or the vertically layered, palimpsest-like temporality of drugtime, moments seem to accumulate beyond their occurrence on a linear temporal axis. According to Tyler, the monotony of dragtime enacted by films like *Empire* invites the transition into drugtime, which transforms boredom into absorption. However, Tyler's description of Warhol's drugtime as "narcoticized" stands in stark opposition to the ecstatic

¹²⁶ Tyler, Parker, "Dragtime and Drugtime; or, Films a la Warhol," in *Evergreen Review* (April 1967).

“retinal circus” of LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS, highlighting the major distinction between Warhol’s and Conner’s deployment of psychedelic aesthetics.¹²⁷

Detouring from *The Psychedelic Experience*

It is unclear when Conner and Leary first met, but their encounter in Mexico solidified their relationship and resulted in a period of mutual influence and collaboration.¹²⁸ In the spring 1963, the Conners left Wichita and moved into Leary’s communal home at 23 Kenwood Avenue in Newton Center, Massachusetts, the headquarters for Leary’s organization, the International Foundation for Internal Freedom (IFIF).¹²⁹ Though they only stayed for a brief period before the house was closed so that IFIF members could themselves leave for Mexico, Conner managed to complete a large pen-and-ink drawing, 23 KENWOOD AVE (fig. 2.11), a *tour-de-force* in his graphic oeuvre.¹³⁰

The following year, Leary requested that the drawing be used as endpaper illustrations for an early edition of *The Psychedelic Experience*. Although Conner permitted the drawing to be used free of charge, he regarded his participation in the book as more of a disruption than an

¹²⁷ Another influential examination of Warhol’s psychedelic aesthetics is offered in Branden W. Joseph, “‘My Mind Split Open’: Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable,” *Grey Room*, No. 08 (Summer 2002): 80–107.

¹²⁸ Conner recalled that he initially met Leary in New York City before moving to Mexico, yet Jean Conner disputes this, stating that Leary didn’t become a personal acquaintance until after they moved to Mexico. Author’s Interview with Jean Conner.

¹²⁹ The Conners’ residency at 23 Kenwood Ave. lasted only a few weeks, until they could no longer tolerate the communal arrangement and especially, Leary’s patriarchal approach to domestic labor, which required that the female residents were solely responsible for housework. Jean Conner was especially disapproving of Leary’s hypocritical gender politics and overall domineering rule over the house. After leaving, they moved to an apartment in Brookline, MA—the birthplace of President John F. Kennedy—where they would remain for the following two years while Conner worked on his film about the JFK assassination, *REPORT* (1963-1967).

¹³⁰ As Peter Boswell describes, 23 KENWOOD AVE is a “breakthrough that leads to his new style of drawing. In this drawing, Conner builds from the techniques he first developed in Mexico, of crafting a dense pattern of marks and squiggles that seem to weave, maze-like, across the expanse of the page, and seem to resemble topographical marks, as if demarking a secret ‘landscape’ of symbols and shapes.” Peter Boswell, “Theatre of Light and Shadow, 2000 B.C.: *The Bruce Conner Story, Part II* (Minneapolis, MA, Walker Art Center: 1999), 54.

endorsement. In an unpublished letter from 2006, Conner remarked, “I did not like the judgment and dictation of experience as they had expressed in the ‘INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE DURING THE PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE.’ If someone took psychedelics and were looking at the book I wanted them to be captured by the drawing and not become involved in the text.”¹³¹ Evidently, Conner regarded Leary’s guide to be overly prescriptive and controlling—qualities he attributed to Leary’s public persona and leadership style.

Conner’s comments on *The Psychedelic Experience* are illuminating, not only because they attest to the strong connections between his drawing practice and psychedelic drugs, but also because they indicate his conceptualization of the drawings as superior guides to psychedelic experience than Leary’s manual. Whereas Leary had attempted, and in Conner’s mind, failed, to provide an optimal “road map” to psychedelic experience in his book, Conner chose drawing and cinema as ideal media for navigating the *heterotopography* of psychedelic experience without dictating the outcomes: map without destinations.

Alchemy-in-Motion

After returning to San Francisco in 1965, Conner immersed himself in the psychedelic scene emerging from the Haight-Ashbury, a cultural mecca for young hippies hailing from across the U.S. Conner’s commitment to this scene is evidenced by his frequent contributions to *The Oracle of the City of San Francisco*, better known as *The San Francisco Oracle*, the leading underground newspaper of the Haight-Ashbury.¹³² Though only twelve issues were published

¹³¹ Bruce Conner, unpublished document dated January 12, 2006, transcribed in full in Appendix 1.

¹³² Originally published in 1984, Charles Perry’s landmark social history of the Haight-Ashbury describes how the first issue of *The Oracle* was called the *P.O. Frisco*, an abbreviated version of “Psychedelphic Oracle,” which had come up in discussions during early planning meetings for the newspapers. Unverifiable sources suggest that Conner himself proposed the name “Psychedelphic Oracle” during these planning meetings. For more on the history of *The Oracle*, see Charles Perry, *A History of the Haight-Ashbury* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 85.

between September 1966 and February 1968, *The Oracle* was central to the development of psychedelic visual culture and popular discourse. It featured articles on alternative spirituality, lifestyle, and popular culture, including astrology, tarot, Buddhism, psychedelic drugs, rock & roll music, as well as political and literary writings. For *The Oracle*'s August 1967 issue, "Psychedelics, Flowers, and War," Conner supplied the cover illustration of a blue and green mandala (fig. 2.12). This issue was published during the height of the so-called "Summer of Love," and focused primarily on psychedelics, starting with an article by Leary and Metzner, "On Programming The Psychedelic Experience," which summarized the results of their experiments with LSD and offered guidelines for optimizing drug experimentation; presumably, Conner would have dismissed the idea of "programming" the experience as symptomatic of Leary's prescriptive approach. Despite Conner's ideological differences with the movement's leading voices, his involvement in *The Oracle* attests to his embrace of the psychedelic counterculture at its euphoric peak.

In contrast to the countercultural ethos of *The Oracle*, mainstream national newspapers expressed contempt for the Haight-Ashbury hippies. For instance, in a humorously "square" yet condescending article called "Hippies Find Ways to Avoid Working," published in *The New York Times* in late August 1967, the same month as *The Oracle*'s psychedelia issue, Stephen A.O. Golden provided a glimpse into the communalist, countercultural lifestyle of the Haight-Ashbury. Golden was apparently bewildered by the hippies' lack of interest in money, remarking that "Contrary to popular opinion in the 'straight world,' few hippies receive allowances from home; they don't need them." He proceeds to describe the Haight's music scene, including a reference to Conner's participation in psychedelic light shows:

...when a band performs there is a light show: a series of color slides, movies, colored lights and flashing images projected onto the walls. The Family Dog, a group that does

light shows, works at the Avalon Ballroom. Bruce Conner, an underground filmmaker, also works a light show. He and many others like him have dual sources of income, some of which goes to hippy charities to support those who do not have jobs.¹³³

Though Golden can hardly be considered an expert on the counterculture, it is notable that he selected Conner as representative of light shows, which were at their height of popularity in 1967. In New York City, Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable light show was accompanying live, feedback-laden performances by The Velvet Underground, while Timothy Leary hosted a series of "psychedelic sessions without chemistry," ostensibly drug-free light shows aimed at spiritual enlightenment.¹³⁴ Jud Yalkut, resident filmmaker for the media art collective, USCO, conducted live intermedia performances at the group's commune in Garnerville, New York, during this same period, and Robert Rauschenberg and Billy Klüver organized the legendarily dysfunctional "9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering" at Manhattan's 69th Regional Armory in 1966.¹³⁵ In Southern California, the Single Wing Turquoise Bird light show collective was comprised of filmmakers and artists, many of whom had previously studied at UCLA.¹³⁶

¹³³ Golden, Stephen A.O., "Hippies Find Ways to Avoid Working," *The New York Times* (27 August 1967): 31.

¹³⁴ Jonas Mekas was especially critical of Leary's performances in his weekly column for *The Village Voice*. In one review July 1965, Mekas describes how Leary read from Ancient Chinese scriptures during a multimedia display of sound, light, moving images; Mekas remarked, "The feeling prevailed that somebody was trying to sell something with these slides. They did not exist for their own sake. It was a soundtrack, the voice that made the images illustrative, forced a meaning upon them that wasn't there. The voice did not leave our eyes alone to follow the flow of shapeless color and forms as they came, but forced the mind to look in them for something else..." Mekas, 197-198, "On the Psychedelic Explorations of Timothy Leary, on Chance, Strobe, and Cinema," *Movie Journal, The Village Voice* (22 July 1965), reprinted in Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 196-199. Evidently Mekas, like Conner, regarded Leary's methods as too controlling and rigid.

¹³⁵ For more on USCO, see Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co.: 1970), 391. Though the scholarship on USCO is slim, a forthcoming book by Zabet Patterson promises to address this gap. Better documented is the *9 Evenings* event organized by Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), which featured performances by Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, David Tudor, Yvonne Rainer, Deborah Hay, Robert Whitman, Steve Paxton, Alex Hay, Lucinda Childs and Öyvind Fahlström, working in collaboration with thirty engineers from Bell Telephone Laboratories, and utilizing cutting-edge technologies including live video projection, wireless sound transmission, and Doppler sonar.

¹³⁶ For more on the Single Wing Turquoise Bird, see Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co.: 1970), 392-396; David James, "Expanded Cinema in Los Angeles: The Single Wing Turquoise Bird," *Millennium Film Journal* 43/44 (Summer 2005), 9-31; and Robin Oppenheimer, "Maximal Art: The Origins and

Whether framed as an experimental intermedia performance, an exercise in enlightenment, or as the backdrop to a rock & roll dance concert, light shows were a major social phenomenon that linked the avant-garde and popular culture via immersive multimedia spectacle.

Conner's interest in the combination of projected light and music began during his undergraduate days at the University of Nebraska.¹³⁷ In San Francisco, Conner attended Henry Jacobs' and Jordan Belson's "Vortex Concerts," a groundbreaking series of light show performances featuring wall-to-wall electronic sound and overhead light projections that were held at the Morrison Planetarium between 1957 and 1960. Later, when Conner returned to San Francisco in 1965, it is likely that he attended light shows during the basement jam sessions organized by music promoter Chet Helms at 1090 Page Street, where artists Bill Ham and Elias Romero honed their trademark liquid projection methods alongside acts like The Charlatans and Janis Joplin.¹³⁸

Aesthetics of West Coast Light Shows," *Rhizome*, April 15, 2009, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/apr/15/maximal-art-the-origins-and-aesthetics-of-west-coal/>.

¹³⁷ Sometime in 1954, Conner commandeered an art history classroom and installed a "total visual and musical environment." Gathering colored transparent cellophane, assorted bits of fabric, portions of celluloid, flowers, oil pigments, and colored dies, he pressed the materials between pieces of glass, and hung them from the walls and ceiling of the room. He then used a dual-projector arrangement to project images onto the walls and ceilings, while spinning records by jazz musicians and the French composer Edgar Varèse. Bruce Conner, unpublished interview with Kristine Stiles, Carton 17, Folder 20, *Bruce Conner Papers*, BANC MSS 2000/50c, The Bancroft Library, The University of California, Berkeley. For more on the origins of San Francisco's psychedelic light shows, see Charles Perry, *A History of the Haight-Ashbury* (Vintage Books: New York, 1985).

¹³⁸ Conner's presence at 1090 Page is mentioned by Gene Sculatti, *San Francisco Nights: The Psychedelic Music Trip, 1965-1968* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 101. Sculatti mentions that Conner projected his own films there, but this is unsubstantiated. Ben Van Meter recalls seeing liquid projections by Ham and Romero at 1090 Page during the mid-1960s, see Author's email correspondence with Ben Van Meter on 23 January 2013. Chet Helms was the Haight-Ashbury rock impresario credited with helping create and publicize the so-called "San Francisco sound" of psychedelic rock. After joining the Family Dog collective in February 1966, he organized dance concerts at the Fillmore Auditorium and the Avalon Ballroom. He also managed Big Brother and the Holding Company, the band that famously jumpstarted the career of Helms' friend, Janis Joplin, who he brought to San Francisco from their shared home state of Texas. For more on Helms, Family Dog, and the origins of psychedelic light shows, see Perry, *A History of the Haight-Ashbury*. For a concise history and analysis of Bay Area light shows, see David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 133-137.

Conner's interest in live performance during this period also drew him to one of the most influential avant-garde dance scenes of the period: the workshops led by the influential choreographer, Anna Halprin.¹³⁹ While taking classes with Halprin in the mid-1960s, Conner acted as a production consultant for her iconic work, *Parades and Changes* (1965-1967), which featured dancers of both genders shedding their clothes while unrolling, shredding, and crumpling large sheets of paper. Conner suggested to Halprin's lighting designer, Patric Hickey, that the stage lights be configured to illuminate and project patterns onto the dancers from all sides, rather than lighting them frontally and flattening the field of projection into a one-dimensional surface; Conner claimed that his aim was to create a "three-dimensional space of movement, continuing change."¹⁴⁰ Although Hickey did not accept his suggestions, Conner's work with Halprin's troupe was an important step in his evolving performance aesthetic, and particularly in his approach to projecting light onto moving bodies.

Halprin's workshops often featured music by minimalist composers Morton Subotnick, La Monte Young, and Terry Riley, founding members of the San Francisco Tape Music Center, a key venue for experimental music performance located at 321 Divisadero Street in the Haight-Ashbury. Conner and other filmmakers associated with Canyon Cinema often screened their work at the Tape Center, and Halprin held workshops in the space as well.¹⁴¹ Although Conner

¹³⁹ Since the early 1960s, Anna (formerly Ann) Halprin's Marin County home had served as a training ground for a number of younger artists and performers, many who went on to be key players in the development of postmodern dance at New York's Judson Church—including Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Simone Forti and Robert Morris. For more on Halprin's workshops and their influence on American avant-garde dance history, see Janice Ross, "Atomizing Cause and Effect: Ann Halprin's 1960s Summer Dance Workshops," *Art Journal* (Summer 2009): 63-75.

¹⁴⁰ Conner described his involvement with Halprin and disagreement with Hickey in conversation with Paul Karlstrom, Oral History Interview with Bruce Conner, August 12, 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁴¹ For more on the San Francisco Tape Music Center, see David W. Bernstein, ed., *The San Francisco Tape Music Center: 1960s Counterculture and the Avant-Garde* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008); Conner's presence at the Center is noted on pg. 34. Halprin is interviewed on pgs. 222-238.

was never trained in musical notation, he frequently worked with Subotnick, Young, and Riley, both in San Francisco and Massachusetts, including a collaborative performance of John Cage's compositions for amplified toy pianos in the late 1950s.¹⁴² Riley, who cites his collaborations with Conner as a major influence, has provided soundtracks to numerous Conner films, including the 1995 version of *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*, *CROSSROADS* (1976), and Conner's final film, *EASTER MORNING* (2008), discussed in the conclusion of this study.¹⁴³

In early 1966, Conner participated in the first major intermedia event on the West Coast: the San Francisco Trips Festival, held at the Longshoreman's Hall from January 21—23.¹⁴⁴ The

¹⁴² Information on the extent of Conner's collaborations with minimalist composers is scant yet intriguing. Conner recalls working with Young and Riley in the late 1950s: "Back in 1959 or 1960, I performed with Terry Riley and La Monte Young and other musicians who were doing experimental music events. I performed a John Cage piece for amplified toy pianos." Scott MacDonald, "Bruce Conner," in *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with American Independent Filmmakers*, Vol. V (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 252. In a later interview from 2005, Conner states: "I was involved with the Tape Music Center and various events that would take place here in San Francisco. I was working with tape loops, natural sounds and various performances that weren't called 'performances,' they were called concerts. At that time, this was the best way to get people into a room and do whatever you wanted to do. This was before 'happenings' and such...It would have been about 1957 or 1958 until I went to Mexico in 1961. Other than working directly with tape and being a performer either spontaneously or with people like La Monte Young and Terry Riley [...] I never did any musical notation according to the rules. I more or less refused to ever learn. There's a piece at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art that's called 'Music' that I started here in San Francisco in the 1950's. I attached labels and instructions to it: 'Release birds.' There are things that look like musical notes. I mailed it to myself. I gave it to Morton Subotnick to perform and about 1964 he returned the music to me and I worked on it more. I put a candle at the top so wax would drip on it. Then I mounted it on a piece of black cardboard with a black velvet curtain. The concept was that the beginning of the music started when the curtain was raised. When it was pulled down, that was the end of it. Now the museum has it in their collection and they apparently don't want people just to see a black velvet cloth; they want them to see the other part of it. The music is always playing." See Hans Ulrich Obrist and Gunnar B. Kvaran, Unpublished Interview with Bruce Conner, 2005, Carton 16, Folder 14, The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

¹⁴³ *EASTER MORNING* is a digital updating of Conner's 1966 film *EASTER MORNING RAGA*, which was originally shot on 8mm Kodachrome stock. Conner expanded the duration, film gauge, and frame-rate of the original footage to produce a meditative visual poem, similar in effect to the 1995 version of *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*. Like that film, *EASTER MORNING* also has a soundtrack by Terry Riley—a tightly compressed version of his composition, "In C." I discuss *EASTER MORNING* in greater detail in the dissertation's conclusion.

¹⁴⁴ There are multiple first-hand accounts of the Trips Festival, the most frequently cited being Perry, *A History of Haight-Ashbury*; Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968); and Ralph Gleason, "On the Town: One Wild Night—A Trips Festival," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 24, 1966. Photographer Gene Anthony produced the largest photographic archive of the event, some of which are reproduced in Anthony, *The Summer of Love: Haight-Ashbury at Its Highest* (Millbrae, California: Celestial Arts, 1980), 106-118.

festival was conceived by Stewart Brand, founder of the activist group “America Needs Indians” and later, of The Whole Earth Catalog. Brand solicited the efforts of two key players: Ken Kesey, best-selling author and leader of the itinerant psychedelic gang, the Merry Pranksters, who staged the infamous “Acid Tests”; and the prominent Bay Area concert promoter, Bill Graham. The first day of the festival was pitched by Brand as a tribute to Native Americans, while the subsequent two days were billed as a continuous intermedia event that would mimic the effects of LSD through coordinated musical performances, light shows, tape loops, and other unexpected happenings. A number of prominent San Francisco psychedelic rock bands played the event, including The Jefferson Airplane and The Grateful Dead, and The Mothers of Invention. While the organizers anticipated two or three hundred attendees, an estimated two thousand people attended over the course of the festival’s three days (fig. 2.13).

Only one of the numerous programs and handbills produced for the Trips Festival names Conner as a participant, listing him as an “illustrious film maker” scheduled to appear on January 23, 1966, the festival’s final day. The cover illustration for this eight-page, pink-and-blue printed program is a Conner pen-and-ink mandala supplied by Michael McClure (fig. 2.14-2.15); the drawing represents an early instance of this emblematic image in psychedelic graphic art.¹⁴⁵ Other Trips Festival programs and handbills do not name Conner, but they do promise “High Energy Experiments” by filmmaker Bruce Baillie and other “illustrious movie makers” associated with Canyon Cinema, of which Conner was a member.¹⁴⁶ Charles Perry, a leading

¹⁴⁵ Mandalas were among the most popular motifs of psychedelic visual culture. Thomas Albright calls Conner’s mandala illustration for the Trips Festival program “one of the first psychedelic mandalas.” Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-1980*, 170. Ilene Susan Fort concurs, writing “Bruce Conner designed one of the first psychedelic mandala posters for the historic 1966 San Francisco Trips Festival.” Fort, “Altered State(s): California Art and the Inner World,” in *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900 - 2000* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art/University of California Press, 2000), 45.

¹⁴⁶ There are conflicting accounts on Conner’s presence at the Trips Festival. Phil Lesh, bassist of The Grateful Dead, recalls that Conner showed films after Michael McClure read his poetry; considering McClure and Conner’s

chronicler of the Haight-Ashbury scene who witnessed the Trips Festival firsthand, reports seeing a looped fragment of newsreel picturing a dazed Jackie Kennedy attempting to open a locked car door in the aftermath of her husband's assassination; this same footage is repeated on a loop in Conner's film *REPORT* (1963-1967).¹⁴⁷

Though the extent of his involvement is unknown, it remains highly likely that Conner did indeed attend the festival, even if he did not discuss or document his participation. That task was taken up by Ben Van Meter, a young filmmaker and pioneering figure in expanded cinema, who would become Conner's close collaborator immediately following the festival. During each night of the Trips Festival, Van Meter shot footage and then rewound it so he could re-expose the same roll the next day. Later, he added a soundtrack of distorted, feedback-laden noise, similar to the sounds produced by the synthesizers and tape loop configurations featured in the event. The result is *S.F. Trips Festival, An Opening* (1966) (fig. 2.16), a delirious nine-minute documentary of wild dancing, costumes, large crowds and staged performances, as well as found footage film and stroboscopic light projections. According to Van Meter, this vision of ecstatic communalism was captured from the imaginary perspective of "a goldfish in the kool-aid bowl."¹⁴⁸

friendship and frequent collaboration, this account seems especially plausible. See Phil Lesh, *Searching for the Sound: My Life with the Grateful Dead* (Hachette Digital, Inc., 2007). San Francisco filmmaker Chick Strand recalls meeting Conner for the first time at the Trips Festival, while she was projecting films from the balcony with Bruce Baillie during sets by Janis Joplin and The Jefferson Airplane played on stage. See Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz, and Steve Seid, eds., *Radical Light: Alternative Film & Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 120-121. An excerpt from Strand's account is reproduced in Appendix 4. To my knowledge, Conner only referenced the Trips Festival once, when comparing the Bay Area's late 1950s art scene to the psychedelic scene of the mid-1960s, stating "It's like the kind of environment that was existing here when the first Family Dog dances and Trips festivals happened. Everybody there were [sic] all artists and performers and audience at once. Whatever was in the air was all private air, because we knew each other." See Karlstrom, Oral History Interview with Bruce Conner.

¹⁴⁷ See Perry, *A History of the Haight-Ashbury*, x.

¹⁴⁸ Van Meter described his process for making the film in a 2007 documentary, *The Trips Festival Movie*, directed by Eric Christensen, which also offers a detailed history of the event and interviews with the festival's organizers.

In his analysis of Van Meter's film, David E. James writes, "The spectacular and maximally visual diegesis fabricated in the film is thus a collage, collapsing spatial and temporal distinctions into a continuous perceptual flow that identifies the people in the film with the environment and the event."¹⁴⁹ James could just as easily be describing the "maximal" visual diegesis, hallucinatory effects, and "collapsing" of normative space and time that characterize *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*. However, a comparison between the two films underscores how their respective visions of psychedelic consciousness diverge. Whereas Conner pairs virtuosic, rhythmic editing with the compressed temporality of a pop song to imagine psychedelic experience in an intensely personal, first-person voice, Van Meter's film translates the chaotic collectivity of an acid test into a filmic palimpsest.

Though Conner and Van Meter took different aesthetic approaches to psychedelic experience, the two became friends and collaborators. In April 1967, Conner joined the North American Ibis Alchemical Light Company (NAIAC), the in-house light show for the Family Dog concert series at the Avalon Ballroom.¹⁵⁰ The NAIAC was co-founded by Van Meter and Roger Hillyard, who coordinated the light shows with a shifting line-up of artists including Howard Fox, Lenny Silverberg, Bob Cummings, and Ernie Palomino. Conner stepped in as a co-manager for the NAIAC for a period of around eight months, until the group disbanded in the spring of 1968.

The NAIAC's performances were complex productions that involved an astonishing array of equipment and materials.¹⁵¹ One layer of illumination was produced through a system of

¹⁴⁹ James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*, 137.

¹⁵⁰ Family Dog was a loose-knit residential collective and concert promotion organization that hosted dances and events at venues across the city. Helms became the group's de facto leader in early 1966, and based the group at the Avalon Ballroom, a large dance hall at 1268 Sutter Street and Van Ness, beginning in April 1966.

¹⁵¹ The following description of the Avalon light shows under Conner's direction is primarily derived from an unpublished interview with art historian Kristine Stiles, who worked as Conner's assistant during the late 1970s. Personally edited and corrected by Conner, the transcript of this conversation provides the most detailed and

overhead projectors, on which the team would position cut-out patterns, transparencies, and colored oils and gels. The liquids were poured into the shallow dish of a fifteen-inch clock face, and when tilted and swirled, Conner recalls, the colors “seemed to pulse to the rhythm of the music.” In addition, more than a dozen slide projectors with carousel trays beamed new images every fifteen seconds at altered focal lengths. The slides ranged from images of nature, American Indians, tarot cards, and original drawings by Conner, including mandalas from the same series that Trips Festival program cover illustration was derived.

Liquid projections and slides ran simultaneously, while strobe lights were aimed at the dancers bodies’ on the floor below. Conner estimated that the screen area spanned a 180-200 degree projection space, allowing all three walls of the hall’s dance floor to be illuminated with rapidly changing and colorful moving images, shapes, and patterns. In addition, Conner projected 8mm and 16mm films, ranging from found footage of cartoons and newsreels to looped segments from his own films, such as COSMIC RAY, BREAKAWAY, and LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS. The arrangement permitted instantaneous juxtapositions: Conner recalled one performance during which Toni Basil’s nude slow-motion leap from BREAKAWAY was juxtaposed with a clip from a vintage Betty Boop cartoon in which she, like Lewis Carroll’s Alice, passes through the looking glass into an “alchemical wonderland” populated by bizarre creatures. The repeated use of the term “alchemical” reflects Conner and his colleagues’ understanding of the NAIAC’s performances as a mystical ritual, where base elements were transformed into luminous matter.

This ritual alchemy was a regular occurrence at the Avalon during Conner’s tenure with

accurate account of Conner’s participation in the light shows. See Kristine Stiles, Telephone Interview with Bruce Conner, December 17, 1985, Carton 17, Folder 22, The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

the group. As a result, their equipment, especially the more fragile materials like film loops and transparencies, would gradually deteriorate, or, in Conner's words, "self-destruct." As such, the film components of the light show mirrored the human body's own inevitable aging and ultimate finitude. If, in the words of feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, film is "death 24x a second," and the cinema stages our own sublimated mortality, then the light shows hyperbolized this sublime death through a psychedelic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, blurring the boundaries between media just as the strobe light fused the moving bodies on the dance floor.¹⁵² The light shows thus constituted the apotheosis of Conner's nearly decade-long quest to come to terms with death, a search that prompted him to go "looking for mushrooms" in Mexico, took him to Leary's door in Newton Center, and finally, drew him back to the West Coast, to the apex of the psychedelic counterculture in the Haight-Ashbury.

Later in life, Conner looked back on the light shows as a creative pinnacle:

We were like a jazz group improvising with the music and the people and the environment in such a way that could not be verbalized or duplicated. We worked from about 8 o'clock in the evening till 2 o'clock in the morning, presenting images on a 180-degree screen for all the greatest rock groups and blues people at the time. After 6 or 7 months of that, I never wanted to make movies again. My films have always related to music, and after improvising with this group of people at the Avalon Ballroom, creating images while the music was happening, I was not inspired to spend months in a room editing film for a 2 1/2 minute song where everybody sat in chairs looking at a little square on the wall. I wanted to expand way beyond that. Ah, but as in all technologies... economics... I ended up not doing anything except drawings.¹⁵³

More like live jazz improvisation than traditional cinema viewing, the light shows provided the possibilities of immediacy, improvisation, chance, and interactivity that had become increasingly central aims of Conner's artistic practice during the 1960s. His desire to "expand

¹⁵² This is the central claim of Mulvey's recent book of the same name. See Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).

¹⁵³ Conner, quoted in Chuck Hudina, "Bruce Conner: Visitor in the World, Part 2," *Release Print* (April 1986), 3.

way beyond” the traditional boundaries of cinematic exhibition thus brought his practice closer to the conditions of live musical performance. Conner remarked:

Since my films were extensions of music, or music in relation to image, what more perfect way than to improvise and create at the time that it’s happening and to have it immediately consumed rather than go through this long delaying tactic of working for months and months and then trying to coerce people into a little room to look at this sort of thing. I didn’t want to make movies anymore. I saw no sense in sitting around for hours and hours doing little splices, going to the film lab, and going through the whole process.¹⁵⁴

To Conner, the consciousness-expanding synaesthesia offered by the light shows evidently surpassed the comparatively passive experience of screening a film that took months to carefully compose, edit and splice. Having grown accustomed to the light show’s improvisational and immediate mode of production and reception, traditional filmmaking suddenly seemed stifling and inadequate.

Conner summarizes the arc of his involvement with the NAIAC as follows:

My involvement in film more or less went out of the way when I got involved in the light show in San Francisco. I felt it was the next application, a reasonable application, a much fuller application of communication using group relationships, music. There were eight people in the light show working as a group—with six overhead projectors, strobe lights, a dozen slide machines (with 60 slides in each), and five movie projectors, etc. It was, at times, the most ecstatic experience, just simply beautiful. But then that experience resolved itself. The scene changed, and also, the organization of that group of people... the direction that I wanted to take that kind of activity was no longer possible: to extend the boundaries and make a collective wholeness.¹⁵⁵

Here, Conner articulates a desire to break down the established boundaries between different media, and, implicitly, audience and performer. His remarks, especially his evocation of a “collective wholeness,” suggest a McLuhanesque technological optimism that characterized discourses on “expanded cinema” during this period, most notably, Gene Youngblood’s

¹⁵⁴ Boswell, Peter “Theatre of Light and Shadow,” *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story, Part II*, 70.

¹⁵⁵ Excerpts from Conner’s comments at the 1968 Flaherty Seminar, published in *Film Comment* (Winter 1969), 22.

landmark 1970 survey of the field, *Expanded Cinema*.¹⁵⁶ Yet, Conner was ultimately frustrated by the intermedia experience that had once seemed so liberating, in large part due to the familiar pitfalls of live, collaborative performance—diverging artistic visions, dueling egos, and, as ever, cost. He found that the light show performances were becoming static—“A light show had to move,”—and the free flow of creativity was being blocked by external meddling.¹⁵⁷

LIBERTY CROWN

The same month that he began working on light shows at the Avalon Ballroom, April 1967, Conner collaborated with Michael McClure on an experimental broadcast for KQED-TV, the Bay Area’s main public television station. Conner and McClure’s collaboration took place during “Video Sutra II,” the second episode of a program that had first aired in August 1966. The only remaining documentation of the event consists of a KQED weekly program guide and a poster, which advertise “Video Sutra II” as featuring guest appearances from Andy Warhol, Michael McClure, and The Grateful Dead; conspicuously, Conner is not named (fig. 2.17).¹⁵⁸ The poster dates the broadcast of “Video Sutra II” to April 26, 1967, and also mentions a re-broadcast of “Video Sutra I,” which featured Allen Ginsberg reading his poem “Wichita Vortex

¹⁵⁶ Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970).

¹⁵⁷ Conner specifically recalled being frustrated by Chet Helms’ criticism that the light shows had become “too intellectual,” and that they showed images of “large breasts” (possibly a reference to the buxom Beth Pewther’s nude dance in COSMIC RAY), which went against Helms’s personal preference for small breasts.

¹⁵⁸ Since KQED destroyed most of its videotapes and archives from this period, I have been unable to confirm whether Warhol or The Grateful Dead were present either Video Sutra I or II. An original copy of the poster and the weekly program guide can be found in the Michael McClure Papers, BANC MSS 2003/222c, Box 52, Folder 6, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Sutra,” which, as discussed in Chapter One, was inspired by the poet’s road trip to McClure and Conner’s Midwestern hometown.¹⁵⁹

For the KQED broadcast of “Video Sutra II,” McClure recited a poem that would later become known as “Video Sutra.” Conner remained behind the cameras, directing their movements and creating optical effects with various instruments in the studio.¹⁶⁰ Although there are no extant recordings of either Video Sutra I or II, Conner transferred a three-minute excerpt of Video Sutra II to 16mm, which he called LIBERTY CROWN (1967). Conner screened LIBERTY CROWN a handful of times before removing it from circulation in the early 1970s; he donated two prints to the Pacific Film Archives strictly for research purposes, but forbade any future public exhibition.¹⁶¹ The film shows McClure, mostly in close-up, walking around the KQED set while reciting verse. Shot in black-and-white, the camera zooms in on and pans across McClure’s face as he stands against a series of video monitors that echo his image; at times, he

¹⁵⁹ According to a listing in a book of his collected poems, Ginsberg read “Wichita Vortex Sutra” on an August 2, 1966 broadcast of Video Sutra, produced by KQED producer Sandra Gardner. See Bill Morgan, *The Works of Allen Ginsberg, 1941 - 1994: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 382. KQED director/producer Robert Zagone confirms that he directed the first Video Sutra, but was not involved in the second program featuring Conner and McClure. Zagone later worked as a liason between KQED and the artists involved in the National Center for Experiments in Television (NCET). Author’s email correspondence with Robert Zagone, April 3, 2013.

¹⁶⁰ In early 1967, this unnamed McClure poem was published by the Auerhahn Press, a small operation run by McClure and Conner’s friend, and former Wichitan, Dave Haselwood. Conner’s mandala drawings provided the accompanying illustrations, including the drawing used for the Trips Festival program. Conner referred to this untitled collaboration as BOOK. For more on the aesthetics of McClure’s poetry, including an explanation of his “beast language,” see Douglas Kahn, “Cruelty and the Beast: Antonin Artaud and Michael McClure,” in *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 322–359.

¹⁶¹ Conner explained his reasons for removing the film from circulation as follows: “It was transferred to a kinescope...At KQED-TV and there were three cameras. It was a poem that Michael McClure and I published in a book. I did the drawings for it. And then, he performed and read the poem and I directed the cameras. But the main reason I took it out of circulation and wiped it out was because the sound transfer for the video tape was distorted. Despite the distortion, Michael allowed me to go ahead and release it. All the sibilance in his voice was distorted, so it would sort of go (makes s-s-s-s noise) you know, and people would ask me, ‘Does he have a speech defect?’ And, for a man whose artistry is words, to have this happening was a great embarrassment to him. The original video tape disappeared out of the archives at KQED, so we couldn’t redo it. So, finally I, I got rid of it.” Nancy Richards, Unpublished Interview with Bruce Conner, October 6, 1984, Carton 15, Folder 38, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 31.

appears doubled and seems to face himself, in a narcissistic reversal of the dual-headed Janus figure. At one point, the camera focuses on the oscilloscope, a device for monitoring video signals, and records its output of wave-like patterns.

During production, Conner was frustrated to discover that trade union rules stipulated that he could not personally handle much of the studio equipment. However, he was able to achieve an array of effects typical of experimental video from this period, effects that are visible in *LIBERTY CROWN*. At times, the black-and-white palette appears to reverse polarities, probably an effect of solarization techniques that Conner may have achieved by manipulating the electronic voltage. The *mise en abyme* effect of multiple McClures pictured on a relay of monitors was probably achieved using several studio cameras, switching between feeds in real time and flipping superimposed images to produce mirror effects and fuse separate feeds together.¹⁶² Before filming, Conner made elaborate notes in the margins of a published copy of McClure's poem, assigning particular video effects to specific verses, which suggests a familiarity with video production.

At various points, McClure's poem addresses the philosophical problem of what it means to exist in an era of live feedback, alluding to the impossibility of self-knowledge in the video age—a theme common to early video art, such as poet Joanne Kyger's experimental video, *Descartes* (1968), produced at KQED's studios under the auspices of the National Center for Experiments in Television (NCET).¹⁶³ Even if Conner did not consider *LIBERTY CROWN* a significant achievement, it represents a remarkable moment in the history of video art, as an

¹⁶² This description of *LIBERTY CROWN* is informed by a series of illuminating conversations with Steve Seid, video curator at the Pacific Film Archive. See author's email correspondence with Steve Seid, May 9, 2013.

¹⁶³ The National Center for Experiments in Television (originally known as The Experimental TV Center) was a Rockefeller Foundation-funded artists' workshop founded KQED-TV in 1967, just months after Conner and McClure's April performance on *Video Sutra II*. For a detailed history of NCET, see Kris Paulsen, "In the Beginning, There Was the Electron," *X-TRA* 15, no. 2 (Winter 2013).

immediate precursor to the experimental artist-run programs that would soon proliferate at major public television stations like KQED, as well as WGBH-Boston and WNET-New York, especially through the efforts of the Rockefeller Foundation-funded NCET.

Between the mid-1950s and the late 1960s, Conner's artistic practice evolved from the relatively static, object-based medium of assemblage to increasingly ephemeral, intermedial, and often time-based media—drawing, small-gauge film, psychedelic light shows, experimental music and dance—forms that are better suited to emulate the immediacy and contingency of a psychedelic trip. In this sense, Conner's artistic aims were opposed to the process of medium-specific “purification” demanded by high modernism, a critical position that is most strongly identified with the formidable American art critic, Clement Greenberg.¹⁶⁴ Conner's involvement with intermedia forms like light shows and mass media like broadcast television are in defiance of high modernist criticism's insistence on medium-specificity and its hierarchical distinction between high and low art. Yet, to dwell too long on Conner's rejection of high modernist aesthetic criteria would, I believe, overestimate the relevance of these critical paradigms to his work.

Recently, art historians, notably Kevin Hatch, have characterized Conner's art as oppositional to dominant aesthetic discourses, especially those associated with high modernism. Yet, these scholars retroactively cast Conner as an antagonist to critical discourses that, by all accounts, he had little interest in.¹⁶⁵ Conner's ongoing attempts to establish less hierarchical, more interactive modes of artistic spectatorship, based on principles such as chance, mutability,

¹⁶⁴ Modernist art critic Clement Greenberg is widely considered to be the major proponent of Kantian aesthetics in the 20th century. Among Greenberg's most famous arguments for Modernism's “purification” of the arts are his 1940 essay, “Towards a Newer Laocoön,” and his 1961 essay, “Modernist Painting,” which are both frequently cited as summaries of his aesthetic philosophy and his influential account of modern art history.

¹⁶⁵ See the first chapter of Hatch's *Looking for Bruce Conner*, which discusses Conner's assemblage practice in relation to art historian and critique Michael Fried's critique of Minimalist sculpture's “theatrical” qualities.

participation and multi-sensory experience, were interests shared by artists involved in Pop, Minimalism and Fluxus, prominent art movements in New York City during the 1960s. Broadly speaking, these movements can be understood as varying reactions against high modernism's elitist separation between media, high and low, artist and viewer, its insistence on autonomy and universality, a pseudo-Kantian "disinterested contemplation" that was updated as Greenbergian "pure opticality." Yet, on the West Coast, high modernist discourse was even further removed from the work being produced, in part because it lacked the relevant vocabulary required to chart these new territories of aesthetic experience. As Peter Mays, a central figure in Los Angeles' Single Wing Turquoise Bird, described his group's aesthetic ethos:

All my experience in art was very personal where I had total control. Working with a group there's a whole different kind of feeling, a kind of communication, a collective vision and meaning that's like Hermann Hesse's idea in *The Glass Bead Game*— taking everything in all cultures and communicating comprehensively on all levels of society simultaneously. In a sense that's what the new consciousness is about, comprehensive living. Our language definitely is anti-Minimal. It's a reaction to Minimal Art just as Minimal Art was a reaction to the complexities of Jackson Pollock's Abstract Expressionism. We're making Maximal Art. I see the whole history of visual art in one historical progression and the light show occupies a very crucial position in that line. It seems that the spirit of Abstract Expressionism has been distilled into a pure form in the light show; sort of carrying on the tradition while at the same time transforming it into something more universal."¹⁶⁶

Mays positions light shows within a genealogy of American art harking back to Abstract Expressionism, and yet, this historical trajectory leads towards "something more universal," rather than to the increasingly narrow, purified, and self-critical forms prescribed by Greenberg. The "maximal" aesthetics Mays describes are closely aligned with Conner's psychedelic aesthetics in *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*, the light shows, and the KQED public television broadcast that became *LIBERTY CROWN*. Conner's lack of regard for the values of modernist aesthetic autonomy is illustrated not only by his involvement in these "expanded" forms of

¹⁶⁶ Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, 396.

cinematic practice, but also by his embrace of the exemplary “kitsch” mode, Hollywood film, during the latter part of the 1960s.

Conner and “New Hollywood”

In the late 1960s, Conner went from being a found-footage recycler of industrial cinema to a paid consultant on a number of “New Hollywood” independent features. One of the first projects Conner was involved in was a psychedelic exploitation film, *The Trip* (1966), directed by legendary B-movie auteur Roger Corman, with a screenplay by Jack Nicholson. Conner makes a brief cameo in a scene where Dennis Hopper, playing a Leary-esque character, passes a marijuana cigarette around to a circle of hippies (fig. 2.18). In a letter to filmmaker Shirley Clarke, Conner boasted about his Hollywood connections and his intention to appear in more movies:

I was in THE TRIP by Roger Corman [...] The producer of THE MONKEES [Rafaelson] has proposed that I travel with the next Monkee tour and make a movie of them [...] Richard Lester [dir. of *A Hard Day's Night*] is making a movie here which I will try to get in.¹⁶⁷

The following year, Conner had a brief cameo in another psychedelic-exploitation film, *The Cool Ones* (1967), directed by Gene Nelson. Toni Basil choreographed the film and asked Conner to appear in party scenes that were filmed at Los Angeles’ legendary dance club, the Whisky-A-Go-Go. Conner makes his appearance during a dubbed performance of “The Tantrum,” a tongue-and-cheek pop song that satirizes (and infantilizes) the psychedelic counterculture, urging the young club goers to “have a tantrum.” For a few brief moments, the camera focuses exclusively on Conner as he flails and shakes to the song (fig. 2.19-2.20).

¹⁶⁷ Shirley Clarke Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, University of Wisconsin, Madison. Cited in Carlos Kase, “A Cinema of Anxiety: American Experimental Film in the Realm of Art (1965-75),” PhD Dissertation, University of Southern California (December 2009): 282, fnnt. 301.

Meanwhile, an assortment of found footage is being projected on the wall behind the dancing crowd, a miscellaneous montage of races, crashes, and explosions that conspicuously recalls the spectacle of disasters in *A MOVIE* (fig. 2.21). Whether or not Conner deliberately influenced the film's use of found footage film, *The Cool Ones* is notable for its seamless appropriation of Conner's signature style into its campy send-up of the counterculture.

After his cameos in *The Trip* and *The Cool Ones*, Conner mainly worked behind the scenes; he helped find locations and did casting for another psychedelic exploitation movie, Richard Rush's *Psych-Out* (1967), and worked as Associate Producer during pre-production for Peter Fonda's directorial debut, *The Hired Hand* (1971). But Conner's greatest impact in Hollywood was through his close relationship with Dennis Hopper, whom he first met in London in 1964, and thereafter frequently visited in Los Angeles. In 1967, Conner met Hopper on location during production of *Cool Hand Luke*, directed by Stuart Rosenberg and starring Paul Newman. Conner brought his 8mm camera and shot about two-and-half minutes of footage, focusing primarily on the film crew performing manual labor on the outdoor set near Stockton, in the southern California flatlands. In 2004-2005, Conner re-visited this footage (since transferred to 16mm), and used digital editing to slow the film down to three frames per second, resulting in 22-minutes of slow-motion, blurred imagery. Patrick Gleeson created a soundtrack for the final edit, which Conner titled *LUKE* (2005) (fig. 2.22).¹⁶⁸

After becoming a director himself, Hopper looked to Conner's films for inspiration, and often remarked that Conner "changed [his] entire concept of editing for film."¹⁶⁹ Conner's impact

¹⁶⁸ In 2004, Conner gave a detailed account of the origins of *LUKE* in an interview with John Yau, "In Conversation: Bruce Conner with John Yau," *The Brooklyn Rail* (November 2004), <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2004/11/art/bruce-conner-in-conversation>.

¹⁶⁹ Hopper, quoted in Joan Rothfuss, "Escape Artist," in *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story, Part II*: 163. In an interview with Henry Hopkins, Hopper stated: "Bruce Conner was a very important artist in my life because he made the best experimental films, well, he made the best short films that I've still ever seen. And they include a lot

is especially evident in Hopper's use of choppy, discontinuous editing in his directorial debut, *Easy Rider* (1969), widely recognized as an inaugural "New Hollywood" film that heralded the symbolic end of 1960's utopian optimism.¹⁷⁰ *Easy Rider* stars Peter Fonda as Wyatt, nicknamed "Captain America," and Hopper as Billy the Kid, a pair of small-time drug dealers who venture on a cross-country motorcycle road trip, beginning in Los Angeles and destined for Florida's beaches. Along the way, Wyatt and Billy stop in New Orleans during the Mardi Gras festival. They visit a brothel, where they hire a pair of prostitutes played by Toni Basil and Karen Black. After enjoying the revelry on Bourbon Street, the foursome enters a decrepit cemetery and ingest LSD. Once their "trip" begins, the film's cinematography and editing become increasingly erratic, and the scene is perpetually interrupted by flickering frames of black. The four characters drift amongst the tombstones and crypts, laughing, weeping, and stripping down their clothes in the thrall of unseen hallucinations. The cemetery scene foreshadows the male protagonists' eventual confrontation with their own deaths during the film's finale, when they are murdered by the roadside by a stereotypical pair of shotgun-wielding hillbillies in a rusty pickup truck.

The cemetery scene ruptures the film's already disjointed narrative flow, both spatially and temporally, in large part because of its location in the cemetery, a space on the social and geographic perimeters of everyday life, or, as Foucault describes, between the living and the dead. For Foucault, the cemetery's liminality qualifies it as the ultimate heterotopic zone.¹⁷¹ The male protagonists of *Easy Rider* make a temporary detour through this heterotopic zone, and ingest hallucinogens in order to gain access to heterochronic time. The scene operates as a

of my editing thoughts and editing direction in *Easy Rider*. A lot of those ideas called out of what I saw in Bruce's work." See the Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst exhibition catalogue, *Dennis Hopper: A System of Moments*, ed. Peter Noever (Hatje Cantz, 2001), 27.

¹⁷⁰ See Appendix 3 for an extensive Conner quote on his involvement in *Easy Rider*.

¹⁷¹ Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias (1967)."

catharsis in the film narrative, enabling the characters to confront their fear of death before re-emerging into the normative space and time of the “everyday” world, where the threat of death is imminent. Of course, death arrives not at the hands of the authorities, but through their reactionary henchmen—Southern rednecks, the rural white poor folks who have historically supported the conservative political establishment at the expense of their own economic interests. To cast poor whites as the murderers of the hippie protagonists reads as a not-so-subtle reference to working-class *ressentiment*, but it also points to Hopper’s and Hollywood’s cultural elitism. In keeping with the road movie genre that it helped launch, *Easy Rider* chronicles a combined physical and psychological journey, which is initiated by the cross-country road trip and reaches a climax with an internal, “head” trip; ultimately, the convergence of these two journeys results in a literal “dead end,” just as in another defining “New Hollywood” road movie, *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967).

In the cemetery scene, Hopper pushes the logic of Conner’s psychedelic explorations to its dystopian conclusion. The journey of his doomed protagonists reads like an allegory for the failure of the 1960s counterculture. By situating the LSD trip within the carnivalesque heterochrony of the Mardi Gras celebration and the heterotopic setting of the cemetery, Hopper’s film motions towards the possibility of radical alterity and social liberation. But this potential is ultimately stifled under the constraints of the male ego—as embodied in Billy’s defiant gesture of flicking-off the rednecks in the pickup truck, and also, in the fact that the film’s only significant female characters are prostitutes, a role that diminishes their claim on self-possession and personal sovereignty, the core American values that motivate the male bikers’ ill-fated quest.

Conner was also involved in Hopper's next feature, *The Last Movie* (1971), a deeply reflexive film-within-a-film set in rural Peru.¹⁷² Hopper plays Kansas (in a self-referential nod to his Kansan roots, a bond he shared with Conner), a Hollywood stuntman working on a western directed by Samuel Fuller (playing himself) about Billy the Kid (another self-reference, this time to Hopper's character in *Easy Rider*). The film begins with Fuller's production crew shooting on location in a remote Peruvian village called Chinchero. When another stuntman is accidentally killed on set, the production packs up and returns to Hollywood, but Kansas decides to stay on and move in with a Chinchero woman. Kansas's Peruvian exploits are disrupted when the Chincheros begin to re-enact the movie using remnants of the set, constructing mock equipment and props out of a *bricolage* of sticks and straw. Despite Kansas's protestations, the Chincheros refuse to accept that Hollywood films are a fictional entertainment—to them, movie violence is real, not simulated. They cast Kansas in the final shootout to Fuller's film, which results in his death.

In *The Last Movie*, Kansas falls victim—or more accurately, is sacrificed—to the Chinchero Indians' literalist interpretation of the Hollywood western, an industrial production that has colonized both their town and their collective imagination. Kansas's search for a utopian escape from Western modernity in a rural Latin American village is reminiscent of Conner's attempt to escape the existential anxieties of Cold War America in the mountains of rural Mexico. Whereas Conner went "looking for mushrooms" and found both his psychedelic aesthetic and a

¹⁷² For more on the making of *The Last Movie*, see Ara Osterweil, "The Last Place on Earth? Allegories of Deplacialization in Dennis Hopper's *The Last Movie*," in *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image*, ed. John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 181–208. David E. James offers an illuminating interpretation of *The Last Movie* as a "meta-generic meditation" on Hollywood cinema, specifically the western genre. See James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 297–303.

new acceptance of death, Kansas is not as fortunate, for his journey, like Captain America and Billy the Kid's, is doomed to be a dead-end.

Conner visited the set of *The Last Movie* in Peru, helping to scout locations during the chaotic production, and after filming wrapped, he made multiple visits to Hopper's studio in Taos, New Mexico, to advise on editing. Hopper owned personal prints of Conner's films and would often watch them for inspiration.¹⁷³ As a result, many of *The Last Movie*'s distinctive features—disjunctive editing, frequent jump cuts, overall lack of narrative continuity and other disruptive, even anti-narrative gestures—reflect Hopper's attempt to imitate Conner's editing style. In particular, Hopper's insertion of false cues like “Scene Missing,” and other typically “unseen” elements from the editing room immediately recall the use of similar materials in *A MOVIE*—which, like *The Last Movie*, is a meta-movie that imagines a disastrous end to classical Hollywood.

In many ways, Hopper was Conner's alter-ego, or more accurately, his Jungian shadow—an inverted mirror-image reflecting his darker, less enlightened aspect. While Hopper was a Hollywood actor and director with avant-garde pretensions, Conner was an avant-garde artist who dabbled, rather enthusiastically, in Hollywood cinema. Despite their many differences and Hopper's infamously erratic behavior, the two men remained life-long friends. In 1973, Conner staged an exhibition of collages using 19th-century wood engravings that he called “The Dennis Hopper One Man Show,” a playful comment on Hopper's celebrity status, and perhaps too, a winking acknowledgement of his friend's many uncredited appropriations.

¹⁷³ Conner quoted in Nancy Richards, Unpublished Interview with Bruce Conner, April 22, 1985. Tape Two, Carton 15, Folder 38, Bruce Conner Papers, BANC MSS 2000/50c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 23. See Appendix 3 for longer excerpt from this interview.

The following chapter will examine Conner's artistic collaboration with the woman who played a prostitute in both *Easy Rider* and *The Last Movie*—Toni Basil. As opposed to Conner's masculine shadow, Basil represented his *anima*, or, the feminine aspect that, in Jungian terms, links man to the collective unconscious. In contrast to Hopper's dystopian elaboration of Conner's psychedelic aesthetics, collaborating with Basil allowed Conner to more fully explore the utopian aspirations inherent to his revised and expanded 1960s practice.

Chapter Two Appendix

Appendix 1

Bruce Conner, Unpublished letter, January 12, 2006, Carton 17, Folder 20, *Bruce Conner Papers*, BANC MSS 2000/50c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Full text:

“THE PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE, Fourth Printing, 1966, Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, Richard Alpert, © 1964

Richard Alpert and Timothy Leary visited me at my flat in Brookline, Massachusetts. They said that they planned to publish their version of the Tibetan Book of the Dead as a guide for people while taking psychedelics. They said that there would be no egos attached to the publication. It would be free of such encumbrances. They asked if I would let them use my drawing titled 23 KENWOOD AVENUE (THE NEW CALENDAR STONE) at no charge on the cover without using my name also. I agreed to the request. I did not like the judgment and dictation of experience as they had expressed in the ‘INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE DURING THE PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE.’ If someone took psychedelics and were looking at the book I wanted them to be captured by the drawing and not become involved in the text.

A few months later, they asked me if I would let the publisher use my name as credit for the drawing. They themselves had agreed to put their names on it as well. They said the publisher told them that it would be possible to market the book with the names attached. ‘Of course we want to get the message out to as many as we can, so we agreed.’ They said that they hoped that I wouldn't be offended if my drawing was included inside the book since the publisher also felt a different cover would sell the book better. The publisher wanted to use a detail of the famous Tibetan sculpture of a god fucking. Sex and egos to the forefront for better sales.

I said that I would continue to agree to the use of the drawing for no charge if the top half of the drawing would be reproduced in a spread from the inside front cover to the right front leaf of the book. The bottom half of the drawing would be reproduced in a similar manner at the back of the book.

The book was published and my drawing was reproduced in the manner I requested. It was printed with a red background to the black and white drawing. This wonderfully lurid presentation was listed on the credits page as: ‘Endpapers: details from a drawing by Bruce Conner.’ The drawing was reproduced in this manner during the early editions of the book in the 1960's. Later, the drawing was deleted from the book. Even though it was deleted, the credit remained describing the blank white pages as: ‘Endpapers: details from a drawing by Bruce Conner.’ It was an even better use of the endpapers. Anyone taking psychedelics could then carefully concentrate on the blank page and see exactly what I meant. When the psychedelics wore off they would discover that what they saw in the endpapers had disappeared as well.

Signed, Bruce Conner. January 12, 2006.”

Appendix 2

Bruce Conner, undated letter to Lee Streiff, *Bruce Conner Papers*, BANC MSS 2000/50c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Reproduced in *Bruce Conner On Drugs (and art)*, limited edition hand-printed book, with introduction by Bancroft librarian Dean Smith (The Bancroft Library Press, University of California, Berkeley, 2011).

Full text:

“I have a cold and sit in bed. I write you maybe draw send microbes to you. Which movie you mean you write in your letter? I have finished one movie called COSMIC RAY which is 4 min. and has WHAT DID I SAY by Ray Charles for music and naked [sic] lady screen and leader NO.s flashing and U.S. Army and Mickey Mouse. I edited it so it would go subliminal and just a little too fast but I didn’t run it on a projector until I went to Los Angeles and hand prints made—then I discovered it went twice as fast as I thought. Anyway—I doubt you will see it at your neighborhood film society because of naked [sic] lady. My color film has been cut up and some of it thrown away and I haven’t used my movie camera since last summer. They have some special mushrooms grown some 150 miles from here that we will go taste when the rainy season starts. U. of Arizona has discovered that Peyote produces an anti-biotic which will kill bacteria that penicillen [sic], aureomycin and other such drugs can not destroy. So—the stories of Peyote as a cure-all...and...We will probably be in TAW with a baby in November.”

Appendix 3

Nancy Richards, Unpublished Interview with Bruce Conner, April 22, 1985. Tape Two, Carton 15, Folder 38, *Bruce Conner Papers*, BANC MSS 2000/50c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Pages 22-24:

“Dennis was editing it [*Easy Rider*] and he asked me to come down and look at it in L.A. when it was about five-and-a-half hours long. And he asked me what I thought he should do and what I told him I was basically what was clear to a number of other people. I couldn’t take credit the way it ended up because Dennis didn’t finish editing it. They took him off. He was going to make a three-and-half hours movie with an intermission. He was seriously talking about it and people thought he was joking. And the way he had edited it (which was kind of interesting) was that these guys get on their motorcycles and they drive on their motorcycles. And we see the American countryside go by and the freeways and the highways. Through forests and such. And then they would stop some place and they’d buy some dope, and then they would go on riding. They’d be chased by helicopters and they’d ride for a long time. And they’d stop at a filling station and they would ride for another five minutes. And they had popular underground rock music which nobody had used in Hollywood movies. So, I enjoyed that part of it. Of course, what happened was all of that riding got cut out. And you just had the action scenes in between. There were scenes that I suggested should be cut or rearranged, so on and so forth, but—it was entirely from a narrative point of view. Dennis was looking for something more artistic. When he made his movie *The Last Movie*, did not use some real good footage. He asked me to advise him what to do about the editing. It could be edited in such a way that it would be a very successful,

money-making movie and still be a wonderfully creative activity. But he, Dennis, has been obsessed with being a personal artist. His way of being a personal artist in a movie industry which has been antagonistic to him and blackballed him, was to make a 'home movie,' for a million dollars and rub their nose in it. He got this contract after *Easy Rider*. He said 'They don't know anything, they don't know what I'm doing. So we got to go do this movie before they find out.' And he got a contract where he had final cut. And nobody at Universal Studios got that before *Easy Rider*. They gave final cut to Peter Fonda, they gave it to Dennis, they gave it to Jack Nicholson, they started giving it to other people...Dennis would put things in *The Last Movie* that had nothing to do with the script or story...he was down in Peru shooting the film...taking all kinds of drugs, sick, not sleeping, being the director, the producer, the writer and the actor. He ended up indulging a lot of obscure things. He actually tried to make it more obscure. And I went to Taos to advise on the editing about five times and finally gave up. 'Either let me edit the film or not.' People told me that every night he would look at my movies. He had prints of all my movies. He would look at them every night, trying to figure it out...What could he do that would make his movie more artistic. And I could have told him that he shouldn't do it that way. So most of my advice has been unaccepted. At times, I have been called a non-narrative filmmaker but that's not true. I mean, all of the constructions that I use are based on the assumptions of a narrative. And by the fact that my film doesn't follow certain expectations of narrative construction, it has its own unique form. I'm always setting up sequences that appear to be a narrative sequence and then they take a different turn. And it's only because of my understanding of the narrative structure that I can use it that way. It's not just happenstance editing, random sort of things."

Appendix 4

Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz, and Steve Seid, eds., *Radical Light: Alternative Film & Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press : University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2010), 120-121.

Chick Strand states: "[T]here was one last thing called the Trips Festival. It must have been late 1965.* Stewart Brand got that together; he rented Longshoremen's Hall and invited the Tape Music Center, the Ann Halprin Dance Group, and Canyon Cinema as well, as well as Janice Joplin, the beginnings of Quicksilver, Ken Kesey. Kesey was handing out LSD; it was about to be made illegal. We were showing one of the first light shows, Bruce [Baillie] and I were up on the balcony showing films. Bruce Conner was up there too: that's when I met him. We were showing films while Janice or Grace [Slick] was singing, or maybe it was in between. They thought two hundred or three hundred people would come; it was packed with two thousand people for three nights. Nothing but rock 'n' roll and acid hits and films."

*In a footnote, the editors state that the festival was held in January 1966.

Chapter Three

BREAKAWAY (1966): Pop Culture, Collaboration, Feminism

*Hey, hey, I've got a twenty-pound ball hanging by a chain around my neck
I've got to get away, run before I become a wreck
I've got to break these chains, before I go insane
I've got to get up and go, go anyplace, I don't know
I'm gonna breakaway from all the chains that bind
And everyday I'll wear what I want, and do what suits me fine
Breakaway, breakaway, breakaway from the everyday
Wagging tongues behind my back, spreading lies that hold no fact
I'm gonna leave behind, all the twisted minds
Who point and sneer at friends of mine, and frown at all good times
I'm gonna breakaway from all the chains that bind
And everyday I'll wear what I want, and do what suits me fine*

“Breakaway,” 1966
Vocals: Toni Basil. Lyrics: Ed Cobb
Equinox Music (BMI)¹⁷⁴

The previous chapter addressed the “psychedelic turn” in Conner’s practice during the mid-1960s, and concluded with a discussion of his influence on Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider*. Through a close reading of its penultimate scene of a cemetery “trip,” I argued that *Easy Rider* represents a dystopian re-imagining of the sublime psychedelic experience that was visualized in *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* and other areas of Conner’s mid-1960s practice, including drawing and light shows. The purpose of this comparison was not to argue for the inadequacy of *Easy Rider* compared to *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*, which, unlike Hopper’s film, maintains a sense of utopian possibility beyond the final film frame. Rather, my intention was to locate the intersecting aims and distinctive results of these two films’ conflicting representations of psychedelic experience, which are similarly inscribed within Foucaultian “heterotopic” time

¹⁷⁴ “Breakaway,” lyrics by Ed Cobb, vocals by Toni Basil.

and space—in Conner’s film, a visually hypnotic journey through the landscape of rural Mexico, and in Hopper’s, a disturbing encounter with the cemetery during a bacchanalian carnival.

In attempting to recover the utopian aspirations behind the psychedelic turn in Conner’s mid-1960s practice, or indeed, any artistic project, it is crucial to avoid either romantic hagiography or an overtly critical assessment of that project’s internal contradictions, inherent limitations, and inevitable failures—keeping in mind all the while that utopias are, by definition, impossible. Film historian Tom Gunning drives home this point in an essay on the utopian aspirations of early cinema, where he writes:

Utopian aspects of the past should never be judged in terms of their realization (or the lack of it), but rather as expressions of broad desires that radiate from the discovery of new horizons of experience. Unrealized aspirations harbor the continued promise of forgotten utopias, an asymptotic vision of artistic, social and perceptual possibilities.¹⁷⁵

This premise frames Gunning’s discussion of Loïe Fuller, a late 19th-century vaudeville performer whose luminous *Serpentine Dance* was a popular attraction on both the international vaudeville stage and in early motion pictures.¹⁷⁶ Fuller’s famed dance involved broad swaths of gossamer fabric that she whipped and whirled in fluid waves around her body, alternately hiding and exposing her flesh. She enhanced the hypnotic effects of the dance by projecting colorful electric lights onto the fabric, creating an array of rainbow hues that anticipated the kaleidoscopic projections of psychedelic light shows, Conner’s preferred medium in the late 1960s.

¹⁷⁵ Tom Gunning, “Loïe Fuller and the Art of Motion: Body, Light, Electricity and the Origins of Cinema,” in *Camera Obscura, Camera Lucida, Essays in Honor of Annette Michelson*, ed. Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey (Amsterdam, NLD: Amsterdam University Press, 2002): 76-77.

¹⁷⁶ Fuller’s *Serpentine Dance*, and a close imitation called the *Butterfly Dance*, was the subject of dozens of films, many produced by some of the major early studios and directors, such as the Skladanowsky Brothers, Thomas Edison, Georges Méliès, the Lumière Brothers, among others, yet none of these films depict Fuller performing.

For Gunning, Fuller's live performance of the *Serpentine Dance* offered "the most complex example of a technological art of motion" in the moment immediately preceding the emergence of motion pictures, and thus played an influential role in the early conceptualization of cinematic movement.¹⁷⁷ Furthermore, he regards Fuller's dance as the most advanced articulation of early cinema's utopian aspiration to merge "the popular and the elite, the aesthetic and the technological."¹⁷⁸ It could similarly be argued that Fuller's (and her many imitators') performances, both through their live and filmed iterations, sparked the longstanding love affair between dance and cinema, and more specifically, the perennial *ménage à trois* between filmmaker, camera, and dancer.

This convergence of choreographed movement and moving image technology has found multiple expressions since Fuller helped launch the genre—from big-budget musicals à la Busby Berkeley to contemporary music videos. Yet, dance has also played an especially important yet under-acknowledged role in avant-garde film history, especially on the West Coast, where Maya Deren filmed her landmark *A Study in Choreography for the Camera* in 1945.¹⁷⁹ Following Deren, postwar American avant-garde filmmakers were increasingly interested in choreography created specifically for the photographic lens rather than for a live audience, and developed experimental techniques and editing styles to compose dances exclusively for film. In 1967, *Dance Perspectives* magazine coined the term "cine-dance" to describe the convergence of cinema and dance, and other terms such as "filmdance," "dance-for-camera," and later, with the

¹⁷⁷ Gunning, 85.

¹⁷⁸ Gunning, 80.

¹⁷⁹ In the words of David James, "It could be argued that the Los Angeles avant-garde cinema was founded on dance." David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 248.

rise of video, “videodance,” coming into use over the following decades.¹⁸⁰ Regardless of terminology, what most avant-garde dance films share is the same basic utopian aspiration that animated Fuller’s *Serpentine Dance*: to harness the transformative possibilities of a technological “art of motion” as a means of transcending—however provisionally and temporarily—the limitations of everyday space and time.

This chapter will tell the story behind Conner’s first and only work of “cine-dance,” *BREAKAWAY* (1966) (fig. 3.1-3.2). An avant-garde dance film infused with utopian energies, *BREAKAWAY* exhibits the dual inheritance of Fuller’s *Serpentine Dance* and Deren’s *Study*, while it also anticipates many of the key features of the MTV-era music video. Like Deren’s film, *BREAKAWAY* was filmed in Los Angeles, during a series of visits Conner made beginning in the fall of 1964 and into 1965; the film’s final edit was completed in 1966. And, just like the vaudevillian scenario of the *Serpentine Dance*, *BREAKAWAY* similarly features a solo dancer, Toni Basil, who was responsible for the choreography, costumes, and the film’s soundtrack. During the film’s five minutes, the camera is aimed exclusively on Basil as she dances alone against an empty black background. Yet, the film’s aesthetic complexity belies this apparent simplicity of concept.

BREAKAWAY begins with opening credits that establish Basil as the star, announcing “ANTONIA CHRISTINA BASILOTTA” (Basil’s given name) before stating the film’s title. During the song’s opening bars, Basil wears a black bra and a pair of black tights into which she cut large circular holes, allowing her pale white skin to peek through in a polka-dot pattern.

¹⁸⁰ The magazine listed Conner’s *BREAKAWAY* and Deren’s classic film alongside Shirley Clarke’s *Dance in the Sun* (1953), Ed Emshwiller’s *Dance Chromatic* (1959) and *Thanatopsis* (1962), Hilary Harris’s *Nine Variations on a Dance Theme* (1966), Babette Mangolte’s *WaterMotor* (1978) (with Trisha Brown), and the films of Yvonne Rainer, as key examples of this hybrid medium. More recently, in 2009, The Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia organized a groundbreaking exhibition called “Dance with Camera,” featuring major works of dance film, video and photography, including *BREAKAWAY*. See Jenelle Porter, ed., *Dance with Camera* (Philadelphia, PA: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2010).

Combined with her jet-black hair and kohl-rimmed eyes, this revealing ensemble highlights the contrast of her alabaster skin against her pitch-black surroundings.¹⁸¹ This opening sequence proceeds as a series of long shots with Basil posing flirtatiously for the camera, hands on hips. Here, the low frame rate produces a stroboscopic flicker effect, making the shots appear staggered, almost like a series of still poses.

When the song segues into the first verse, these flickering long shots are suddenly punctuated by rapid, zooming close-ups on Basil's upper body as she thrashes, twirls and shakes. Here, she wears a diaphanous white slip, which blends with her pale skin and gives her a delicate, ethereal look. As the music reaches a crescendo near the end of the first chorus, the zooms cease and the frame rate standardizes, allowing the camera to linger for a six-second close-up on Basil's face as she coyly purses her lips and stares directly into the camera, while gently caressing her chest and neck. But this fleeting sense of calm quickly vanishes with the second verse, when the visual chaos returns in full force.

When the chorus repeats, "I'm gonna breakaway from all the chains that bind/ And everyday I'll wear what I want, and do what suits me fine," Basil seems to perform the lyrics through a series of rapid costume changes— a white tank top, black jumpsuit, black bra, a frilly floral bikini, and at points, she emerges with bare breasts. Eventually, she sheds all these guises, her nudity symbolically enacting a "breakaway from all the chains that bind" in the form of physical and sexual liberation. During the song's latter half, portions of the celluloid appear "spoiled" with edge fogginess and round perforations, which typically indicate the end of a 16mm roll; these holes register visually as circular white orbs, and resemble stage lights as they scroll vertically down the frame, while also recalling Basil's homemade polka-dot stockings

¹⁸¹ Author's interview with Toni Basil, March 12, 2012.

from the film's beginning. As the song approaches its final bars, Basil emerges nude, soaring across the frame in a climactic series of three slow-motion, balletic leaps (fig. 3.6), as she declares "and everyday, I'll wear what I want, and do what suits me fine," the climax to a striptease that is more existential than erotic.¹⁸²

Just as the music begins to wind down, the unexpected occurs: both the film and song suddenly begin to "re-wind." As Basil's dance repeats in reverse, her body appears to defy gravity as if animated by an uncanny force. The song is similarly transformed from a catchy, upbeat pop tune into an otherworldly, psychedelic symphony of noise and garbled speech.¹⁸³ In a playful twist, Conner inserted additional frames to the ending: two flashing close-ups on Basil, one of her posing in a pair of sunglasses and one of her seated with legs crossed, wearing a black bra, printed stockings, and a garter belt; and finally, a winking ending: "FINE."

The title of *BREAKAWAY* is taken from a song that Basil recorded in 1966, as the B-Side to her single, "I'm 28," a woeful ballad of impending spinsterhood. Yet, "Breakaway" is the literal flipside to this downbeat lament: an empowered, energetic dance track influenced by the bass-heavy sounds of African American R&B (Motown, Stax Records) and Phil Spector's signature girl group production and pioneering "Wall of Sound" techniques (The Ronettes, The Crystals). However, since Basil is a white woman, her sound is also quintessential "blue-eyed-

¹⁸² In this sense, *BREAKAWAY* offers less extreme, and less critical, interpretation of the "existential striptease" than that seen in Gunvor Nelson's *Take-Off* (1972), a landmark work of feminist avant-garde film in which a professional exotic dancer performs a striptease *ad infinitum* that culminates in total bodily dismemberment and disintegration into the cosmos. Unlike Conner's film, in Nelson's, the "breakaway" from time and space is literal and permanent, her dissolution complete, and visual pleasure is totally annihilated. For more on *Take-Off* in the context of Nelson's other films, see June M. Gill, "The Films of Gunvor Nelson," *Film Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 28–36. For more on Nelson's work, see John Sundholm, ed., *Gunvor Nelson and the Avant-Garde* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlagsgruppe, 2003).

¹⁸³ The backwards looped sound in *BREAKAWAY* recalls a famous example of "backmasking" and tape loops from the same year, The Beatles' 1966 album *Revolver*. One track off of that album, "Tomorrow Never Knows," is considered one of the earliest examples of "psychedelic" rock music, and was used as the soundtrack for Conner's *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*, as discussed in Chapter Two.

soul,” in the style of British vocalists like Petula Clark or Dusty Springfield. Initially, “Breakaway” appears to be a classic girl-pop break-up song, in which Basil fantasizes about freeing herself from the “twenty-pound ball hanging by a chain around my neck.” But when she arrives at the refrain, it becomes clear that she wants to be free from more than just her ball-and-chain; like a mantra, she chants “Breakaway, breakaway, breakaway from the everyday,” demanding an escape from the “twisted minds” that represent mainstream society. Though “Breakaway” had not yet been recorded when Conner and Basil began collaborating on their film (explaining, in part, why Basil does not lip sync), her dance nevertheless seems to interpret the song’s lyrics, particularly its anthemic refrain—“Breakaway, Breakaway”—in which she yearns for a release from the monotony and oppression of “everyday” conventions.

Throughout BREAKAWAY, Conner uses the camera to transform Basil’s dance and her physical body into a flickering, spectral image of pure kinetic energy. Rather than document her movements from a distance, Conner danced in tandem with Basil while wielding his camera, re-creating its rapid zooms, tilts, and pans with his own body. The result is a quasi-choreographic style of cinematography that enacts a *pas-de-trois* between filmmaker, camera and dancer, one that undermines the subject-object dyad and gestures towards a more collaborative, interactive mode of both making and looking at film. In addition to this *choreo-cinematography*, Conner included pulsating zooms, virtuosic rapid-fire editing, and stroboscopic effects, which blend together to produce a hypnotic, near-synaesthetic spectacle of sound, light, and movement—key components of psychedelic vision. These effects render Basil’s dance increasingly frenzied and ecstatic, while her physical appearance oscillates between that of an alluring ingénue and otherworldly phantom. Conner’s manipulation of Basil’s dance peaks at the film’s mid-way

point, when the film image and the soundtrack suddenly repeat backwards on a reverse loop, producing an uncanny sense of infinite movement and sound beyond the film's final frame.

Like “a cloud constantly changing with the rhythm of an invisible body”; “she is an apparition, not a woman of flesh and blood”; who conjures up “the impalpable, intangible, ethereal, supernatural essence that arises.” These historical descriptions of Fuller's *Serpentine Dance* are uncannily similar to how one might describe Basil's appearance in *BREAKAWAY*. Like Fuller, Basil also came from a theatrical background, growing up with two parents who were vaudeville entertainers—this might help explain her “stage presence,” an innate ability to engage the spectator through a combination of virtuosic ability and reciprocation of the camera's gaze.

Still, there remains key differences between the two performances: whereas Fuller's dance was designed for the vaudeville stage and its cinematic incarnation functioned primarily as a *reproduction*, Basil's dance was developed especially for Conner's camera lens—there can be no “live” re-enactment of the profilmic dance, for its existence is predicated upon the presence of Conner's camera. Moreover, the utopian aspirations of *BREAKAWAY* are not rooted in the desire to completely transcend the social and the historical, the contingencies of the physical body and the everyday world. In describing the French Symbolists' fascination with the *Serpentine Dance*, Gunning notes how, for these aesthetes, Fuller was “the embodiment of Symbol, she was meaning divorced from specificity, an image unmoored by reference or representation, becoming purely the flow of movement in all its sensuality and its constantly changing, evocative pursuit of analogy – the pulsing matrix of meaning itself.”¹⁸⁴ Yet *BREAKAWAY*'s “art of motion” is never completely purified of reference and representation;

¹⁸⁴ Gunning, 81.

to the contrary, Conner and Basil's "breakaway from the everyday" is enlivened by the specificities of cultural identity, geographic place and historical time—theirs is a utopia predicated on the social, the popular, and indeed, on the "pulsing matrix" of desire itself ("I'll wear what I want and do what suits me fine"), rather than on transcendence from these categories.

One of the few films Conner produced in L.A., *BREAKAWAY* contains a unique degree of "site-specificity," and in the following pages, the film's geographical and historical situatedness will prove central to my argument. Equally central is the film's status as an artistic collaboration between Conner and Basil, filmmaker and dancer/vocalist. Throughout this chapter, Basil's participation in the film provides the lynchpin to the following analysis of the film's salient features: media and generic hybridity—a fusion of dance and film, avant-garde and pop; its embeddedness in the specific geographic and cultural milieu of 1960s Los Angeles; and its relationship to the history of dance on film—from early cinematic motion studies to MTV music video. Basil was, as she understands it, the "vehicle" for *BREAKAWAY*'s explicitly utopian, implicitly feminist, and radically "pop" vision of physical, social, and sexual liberation, one that situates it firmly within the 1960s countercultural imaginary. With its utopian projection of a liberated realm outside of everyday experience, Basil's performance signals a recapitulation of Conner's atomic sublime aesthetic, in the unexpected guise of girl-pop and go-go dancing.¹⁸⁵ Collaboratively engendered by an avant-garde filmmaker and an industry entertainer, *BREAKAWAY* thus also points to the conditions of mutual exchange between artists and mass culture that characterized and catalyzed a broad yet under-explored field of postwar American art.

¹⁸⁵ In this, I again take inspiration from David E. James, who has written extensively on both the connections between "minor" and "major" cinemas in Los Angeles during this period, and on the connections between avant-garde film and music video. See James's *The Most Typical Avant-Garde* and his "Avant-Garde Film and Music Video: A View from Zurich," *Power Misses: Essays Across (Un)Popular Culture* (London: Verso, 1996): 230-247.

Situated at this curious cultural and geographic intersection of avant-garde experimentation and popular culture in mid-1960s Los Angeles, *BREAKAWAY* also represents a distinctive “crossroads” in Conner’s filmmaking practice. In the following, I argue that the film’s utopian vitality hinges on its proximity to, rather than autonomy from, the culture industry. This proximity is not a retroactive symptom of *BREAKAWAY*’s stylistic anticipation of MTV, but rather, is its primary condition of possibility. To set the stage, I begin in Santa Monica in 1964, the setting of *BREAKAWAY*’s production and of another rich instance of cinema’s convergence with pop music and dance, *The T.A.M.I. Show*.

L.A. 1964: Creative Constellations

Toni Basil (born Antonia Christina Basilotta, 1943) has had a long and varied career in the entertainment industry. A quadruple-threat, she has worked as a professional dancer, choreographer, actress, and singer since the early 1960s. Her fame peaked relatively late in her career, with her early 1980s one-hit-wonder, “Mickey,” and its iconic cheerleader-themed music video, a staple on MTV’s early rotation.¹⁸⁶ Conner met Basil in the early 1960s through Dean Stockwell, a former child actor who occasionally worked in Hollywood and who, like Conner,

¹⁸⁶ Upon graduating high school in Las Vegas, Basil moved to Los Angeles in the early 1960s to begin her career in entertainment. She became involved in the Berman circle after she began dating Stockwell in 1963. During the late 1960s, she acted in a number of “New Hollywood” films, many associated with Bob Rafelson and Bert Schneider’s Raybert/BBS Productions. She played a prostitute in *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969) (which also featured a cameo by Wallace Berman); a lesbian hitchhiker in *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970); and a prostitute in *The Last Movie* (Hopper, 1971). Rafelson and Schneider financed many of these films with profits earned from their invention of The Monkees, a television show featuring a fictitious, Beatles-esque “band.” When the show was cancelled in 1968 and The Monkees tried to transition from a television-based phenomenon to a legitimate rock band, Rafelson directed them in a self-parodying experimental rock musical (co-written by Jack Nicholson) called *HEAD* (1968). Basil was hired as choreographer, and created one of the film’s stand-out dance numbers for Davy Jones’ “Daddy’s Song.” At Rafelson’s suggestion, Basil’s dance with Jones against a black-and-white is subjected to disorienting flicker effects; the result is, incidentally, highly reminiscent of *BREAKAWAY*. As discussed in Ch. 2, Conner was also involved in a number of lower-budget and “New Hollywood” productions, many involving Dennis Hopper, Peter Fonda, Jack Nicholson, Roger Corman, and Raybert/BBS Productions, including *The Trip*, *Psych-Out*, *Easy Rider*, *The Last Movie*, and *The Hired Hand*.

was good friends with Dennis Hopper. Together, they belonged to a loose-knit social circle that was affiliated with the artist Wallace Berman, best known for founding the avant-garde journal *Semina* in 1955.¹⁸⁷ Basil was an active member of the *Semina* circle, and even produced experimental 16mm films featuring her artist, dancer, and musician friends.¹⁸⁸ Throughout her career, she has been fascinated by the interaction of dancer and camera, and has explored this dynamic in a variety of modes of production, from big-budget television spectacles and Hollywood musicals to more intimate, spontaneous collaborations with fellow dancers and artists.

¹⁸⁷ Conner's friendship with Berman formed after Berman fled to San Francisco on the tails of an obscenity charge after his exhibition at Los Angeles' Ferus Gallery was raided by the LAPD vice squad in 1957. Berman returned to Los Angeles in 1961, and in 1965 he settled in the rustic area of Topanga Canyon, a bohemian enclave of musicians and artists. See the exhibition catalogue *Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and his Circle*, ed. Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna (D.A.P./Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2005), and Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Publishers, 1991).

¹⁸⁸ Basil's film *Our Trip* documents a 1967 visit to London that Basil took with Garr and fellow dancer Anne Marshall. It includes brief shots of John Lennon and George Harrison, and its soundtrack is two quintessential "psychedelic" rock songs, Cream's "I Feel Free" and The Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." Notably, The Beatles were admirers of Berman's; a portrait of the artist that was based on a photograph by Dean Stockwell appears on the famed *Sgt. Pepper's* album cover, designed by Peter Blake and Jann Haworth. *Our Trip* is remarkably similar to another artifact of mid-1960s pop culture, an experimental "travelogue" film shot in 1966 by Roger McGuinn, the guitarist for the California psychedelic rock band The Byrds. McGuinn's film takes The Byrds' hit 1966 song "Eight Miles High" as its soundtrack, and features rhythmic in-camera editing of London street scenes; the result resembles both an amateur "music video" and, strikingly, Basil's film. When McGuinn was recently interviewed about the film, he recalled seeing "a film by Bruce Conner featuring Toni Basil" — *BREAKAWAY* — which inspired him to replicate Conner's editing style. A few years after she made *Our Trip*, Basil filmed a pick-up softball game that took place weekly at the corner of Bonnell Drive and Topanga Canyon Blvd., a few miles from the Berman family home on Arteique Road. The film opens with a re-photographed television broadcast of a sports program called "Game of the Week," which lends the film its title. Initially, a recording of Kate Smith's famed version of the "Star Spangled Banner" is heard on the soundtrack, but its epic bombast is soon replaced by unnamed jazz tune, more appropriate to the spontaneous nature of the softball game and rather frenzied quality of the cinematography. A number of "Semina circle" artists appear at bat during the game, including Stockwell, Tamblyn, Herms, and Berman himself, while an audience of mainly women and children, including Shirley and Toshi Berman, cheer them on from the sidelines. The game is finally interrupted by the arrival of the police and a bulldozer. Of all of Basil's films, the one most closely related to *BREAKAWAY* is 1968's *A Dance Film, Inspired by Jim Morrison*, a one-minute black-and-white "cine-dance" featuring a multiracial cast of dancers, camera effects like multiple exposure and strobe, and music by Jimi Hendrix. See *Our Trip*, Basil, 1967, 6 min., 16mm: feat. Teri Garr, Anne Marshall, Toni Basil; *Game of the Week*, 1967, 9 min.; *A Dance Film Inspired by Jim Morrison*, 16mm, 1 min. Films transferred to DVD and stored in the Bruce Conner Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley.

For Basil, her dual practices as a paid professional in the entertainment industry and as an underground “amateur” artist have been complementary and continuous.¹⁸⁹

Basil had her “big break” in Hollywood in 1964, the same year she and Conner began BREAKAWAY. She began working as an assistant choreographer to her teacher and mentor, David Winters, who was head choreographer on a variety of productions, including the television variety show, *Shindig!* (1964-1966),¹⁹⁰ and *The T.A.M.I. Show* (1964), a concert film directed by a twenty-three year old television producer named Steve Binder.¹⁹¹ *The T.A.M.I. Show*—an abbreviation for “Teen Age Music International”—featured performances that were filmed during a two-day concert held at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium on October 29th and 30th, 1964. The film debuted in Los Angeles theaters two weeks later, on November 14th, initially for just a two-day run, but then opened at theaters across the country in the following months.¹⁹² In part because it was removed from circulation for decades after its premier, *The T.A.M.I. Show* has achieved a legendary, almost cult reputation within rock music history as one of the most important and influential concerts ever captured on film.

The T.A.M.I. Show features the top musical acts in every genre, from pop to Rock & Roll, R&B and soul. Politically progressive for 1964, both audience and stage were racially integrated, with whites and African Americans intermingling on and off stage. The line-up included Chuck Berry, Lesley Gore, The Beach Boys, Gerry and the Pacemakers, Marvin Gaye, and The

¹⁸⁹ Author interview with Toni Basil, March 13, 2012.

¹⁹⁰ The in-house dance troupe for *Shindig!*, the “Shin-diggers,” also featured Basil’s friend and fellow Winters’ student, Teri Garr, who also became involved in the Berman circle. During the 1960s, Winters choreographed dozens of films and television shows, including five Elvis Presley musicals. Basil and Garr both were involved in *Viva Las Vegas* (1964) starring Elvis Presley and Ann Margret, although only Garr’s appearance is credited. See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0058725/fullcredits#cast>.

¹⁹¹ Binder went on to produce and direct numerous other projects, most famously, Elvis Presley’s ‘68 Comeback Special for NBC.

¹⁹² *The T.A.M.I. Show*, dir. Steve Binder, 1964. DVD release, 2008.

Supremes—but arguably, these stellar performances were eclipsed by the final two acts: a legendary set by James Brown and the Famous Flames, followed by The Rolling Stones in one of their earliest U.S. appearances (fig. 3.3).¹⁹³ Indeed, much of *T.A.M.I.*'s mythical status stems from Binder's last-minute decision to make The Rolling Stones the closing act, slotted directly after James Brown's inimitable performance.¹⁹⁴ Following "The Hardest Working Man in Show Business" was not an enviable task, but Mick Jagger responded in characteristically brazen fashion: by casting an unflinching stare at the cameras, defiantly turning his back on the audience, and, in the ultimate gesture of friendly one-upmanship, mimicking Brown's signature dance move, a one-legged shuffle that glides laterally across the stage. With frenzied applause and screams, the mostly teenaged audience immediately recognized and affirmed Jagger's appropriation.

Brown and Jagger's performances made an especially strong impact on Basil, who was on hand to witness rehearsals and personally interacted with The Rolling Stones, as shown in a photograph taken by Steve Binder (fig. 3.4). After Brown had rehearsed, Basil recalls: "I ran to the bathroom and tried to do his steps while looking in the mirror, trying to figure out his moves,

¹⁹³ The Rolling Stones's appearance at *T.A.M.I.* was just weeks after their first televised performance in the U.S. on the Ed Sullivan Show.

¹⁹⁴ James Brown considered it one of his best-ever performances, later recalling "I don't think I ever danced so hard in my life, and I don't think they'd ever seen a man move that fast...it was one of those performances when you don't even know how you're doing it." Brown also recalled Jagger's anxiety before going on stage: "Meantime, we were out there doing another rehearsal. When we did, a lot of people came out of their dressing rooms to watch, Mick included. I think he'd heard about us already, but when he saw what we did, he couldn't believe it. After he saw me, he didn't even want to rehearse. Some discussion started then about them going on sooner. I heard that Mick smoked a whole pack of cigarettes, he was so nervous." Nevertheless, Jagger and the band regained their composure soon after they walked on stage to perform. "Mick had been watching me do that thing where I shimmy on one leg and when the Stones finally got out there, he tried it a couple of times. He danced a lot that day. Until then I think he used to stand still when he sang, but after that he really started moving around. Anyway, after they were finally able to get on stage, they got over real good. At the end, all of the people on the show came out and danced for the finale. Later on, Mick used to come up to the Apollo and watch my shows. I used to make him come on the stage, and he became a good friend of mine. I like Mick, Keith Richards, and all the guys. I don't think of them as competition; I think of them as brothers." See James Brown with Bruce Tucker, *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1986): 153-155.

his cadences.”¹⁹⁵ Once The Rolling Stones were informed that they were to perform after Brown, Basil anxiously awaited the band’s response and was shocked at the result, a form of “rebellious theater” that she describes as “post-modern.” Basil’s rich description captures the drama, suspense, and innovation of the *T.A.M.I.* performances, and demands to be quoted at length:

I just thought these guys [The Rolling Stones] were dead in the water. The Santa Monica Civic Auditorium’s stage was very wide. Since we were the choreographers, David [Winters] and I decided to go out and sit on the side of the stage off camera; I wanted to see what the hell was going to happen. I wanted to see the audience’s reaction to them. I wanted to see how they were going to get out of this one...So finally, maybe the tune was ‘Around and Around’, where there is this big cymbal crash in the opening of the song and Mick had a tambourine in his hand and simultaneously with the crash in the music Mick jumped up in the air, and, as he jumped up in the air, Brian Jones turned his back on the audience, which was the first rebellious piece of theatre I had ever seen in my entire life. I come from vaudeville. My parents were in vaudeville, and on stage you never turned your back to the audience. So Mick was jumping in the air, Brian had his back to the audience and Mick hit the ground in a crouch. And not one person, including me, ever remembered James Brown again. It was fantastic—Mick’s moves. What is this? This kind of paraplegic funky chicken. What is he doing? As a trained dancer and even as a go-go dancer and street dancer, I had never seen such moves in my life. I mean, what they really were was post-modern and right on the beat...Mick was doing physicalities that no one had ever seen before, in the same way James Brown was doing physicalities that no one had ever seen before. Elvis Presley, James Brown and Mick Jagger had some similarities regarding dancing. They moved exactly to the beat. They understood the backbeat. James, of course, understood it from a gospel sense. But Mick—even though his moves were very abstract, they were almost like what white boys do who can’t dance—Mick always danced to the beat. Elvis, James and Mick *nailed* the beat.¹⁹⁶

On October 6th, three weeks prior to *T.A.M.I.*’s premiere Basil and Conner began their collaboration just around the corner from the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, at the apartment of their mutual friend, a young curator named Jim Eliot, who lived above a merry-go-round on the Santa Monica Pier.¹⁹⁷ Dennis Hopper was also present, and allegedly held the lights during shooting. This initial session yielded little viable footage, save the flickering glamour-poses seen

¹⁹⁵ Toni Basil interviewed by Simon Spence, in Andrew Loog Oldham, *2Stoned*, ed. By Christine Ohlman (London: Secker & Warburg, 2002): 148.

¹⁹⁶ Basil, quoted in *2Stoned*, 149-150.

¹⁹⁷ “Jean Conner in Conversation with Gerald Matt,” *Bruce Conner: The 70s*, 150.

at the beginning of the film's final version. However, Dean Stockwell was also on hand, and documented the session with his own camera, resulting in a behind-the-scenes perspective on Conner and Basil's collaboration. Beginning in 2005, Conner edited Stockwell's footage into thirteen-minute film called *PAS DE TROIS*, and added a soundtrack by The Rolling Stones, "Goin' Home," off their 1966 album, *Aftermath*. The result is remarkable backstage glimpse of Conner and Basil's working process.¹⁹⁸

The title of *PAS DE TROIS* refers to the three-person "dance" between Basil, Conner, and Stockwell, which was further mediated by the two cameras recording their encounter. Stockwell's footage shows Conner clad in a white undershirt with camera in hand, dipping and diving in tandem with Basil as she shimmies and poses against the black screen—photographic evidence of his *choreo-cinematographic* method (fig. 3.5). Also revealed is Conner's own idiosyncratic style of dancing, where he shuffles from side to side by grinding his feet and lifting alternate legs, immediately recalls James Brown's performance on the *T.A.M.I.* stage. To appropriate Basil's comment about Jagger, Conner moves like "a white boy who can't dance," deploying abstract moves that stay on the beat but lack Brown's virtuosic rhythm and elegance. In short, Stockwell's footage strongly suggests that Conner was familiar with Brown's signature dance moves when he first started shooting *BREAKAWAY* with Basil in early October 1964, just weeks before Brown and Jagger's performances made rock music history.¹⁹⁹ *PAS DE TROIS* thus not only provides rare documentation of Conner's filmmaking methods, it also testifies to

¹⁹⁸ Although "Goin' Home" was released after Stockwell shot the original footage seen in *PAS DE TROIS*, Conner selected the song because of its eleven-minute playing time, which would allow the film to have a single continuous, extended soundtrack. But, considering that Basil was also in rehearsal for *The T.A.M.I. Show* during the same period that *PAS DE TROIS* was filmed, we might also assign special significance to Conner's choice of The Rolling Stones as a soundtrack.

¹⁹⁹ Though the events documented in *PAS DE TROIS* took place weeks before *The T.A.M.I. Show* concert was staged, Conner had apparently seen Brown perform live sometime during the previous year while he and his wife Jean were living in Brookline, MA. Author's Interview with Jean Conner, April 12, 2013.

the presiding influence of *The T.A.M.I. Show* and Los Angeles pop music culture more generally on the production of BREAKAWAY.

Besides BREAKAWAY, an even more explicit relationship between *T.A.M.I.* and avant-garde film in Los Angeles can be found in Wallace Berman's film *Aleph* (1956-1966), which embeds actual footage of the Rolling Stones' *T.A.M.I.* performance within a montage of found images and home movies that Berman then spent ten years editing, scratching, and painting over in a style akin to that of Stan Brakhage.²⁰⁰ At Basil's invitation, Berman and his son Tosh had attended *T.A.M.I.* rehearsals, but departed before the concert began, perhaps in order to avoid the legions of screaming teenagers that were convening at the auditorium.²⁰¹ But Berman did attend the theatrical release of *The T.A.M.I. Show* a few weeks later, and brought along his 8mm camera to shoot footage for *Aleph*. Berman's film includes shots of The Rolling Stones' *T.A.M.I.* performance and numerous close-ups on Jagger, who intermittently appears for a total of about thirty seconds. Berman also included a few moments of flickering close-ups on his and Basil's friend Teri Garr as she dances behind Mary Wilson of The Supremes on the *T.A.M.I.* stage.

Although Berman did not include any images of James Brown's legendary *T.A.M.I.* performance in *Aleph*, he did include "the Godfather of Soul" in a so-called "Verifax" collage from 1964, the same year *T.A.M.I.* premiered.²⁰² Berman retroactively titled the collage *Papa's Got a Brand New Bag*, after a hit single that Brown released in 1965. In the collage, a small reproduction of a publicity photograph of Brown appears alongside images of famous cultural

²⁰⁰ The most accurate and illuminating description of *Aleph* can be found in James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde*, 278-280.

²⁰¹ Backstage at *T.A.M.I.*, Berman was introduced to The Rolling Stones, and struck up a friendship with guitarist Brian Jones, who often visited the Berman's home before his death in 1969. See *Semina Culture*, 359.

²⁰² The Verifax collages are Berman's signature works. They utilized an early form of photocopying, and typically feature an image of a hand holding a small transistor radio, with a smaller picture of a famous personage or object framed within.

icons of that year, including heavyweight champion Cassius Clay, J.F.K. assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, and Mick Jagger and Charlie Watts of The Rolling Stones. The collaged composition suggests that Brown and The Stones had attained a similarly elevated status within Berman's mystical pop cultural cosmology. Just like Conner, Basil, and especially, white rock n' roll icons like Jagger and Elvis Presley, Berman's admiration for African American culture compelled a combination of admiration, identification, imitation, and outright appropriation.²⁰³

Yet, to an even greater degree than her male artistic counterparts, it is Toni Basil whose creative life has unfolded within the context of an African American popular culture. Though she is best known for her one-hit-wonder "Mickey," within the dance world, Basil is considered a major pioneer of "street dancing," a term that she coined to describe African American vernacular dances that anticipated hip hop style.²⁰⁴ During the early 1970s, Basil was a founding member The Lockers, a street dance crew that specialized in the "locking" style developed by fellow Lockers founder Don "Campbellock" Campbell. She continues to choreograph, perform in and judge dance events and competitions, and even has her own dance-themed YouTube channel, where she invites fellow street dance legends to improvise choreography with her.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ As a former "zoot suiter" and avid listener of jazz and be-bop, Berman exemplified Norman Mailer's classic description of the white hipster phenomenon. Art historian Ken D. Allan writes that "the black, bebop jazz musician provided a crucial example of artistic vanguardism which influenced the development of a new art community that emerged around Berman." Allan, 76, in "City of Degenerate Angels: Wallace Berman, Jazz and *Semina* in Postwar Los Angeles," *Art Journal* (Spring 2011): 70-91. Strangely, Allan does not reference Mailer's influential 1957 essay.

²⁰⁴ In one illuminating interview, Basil explained her involvement and promotion of "street dance" as based on the belief that African American vernacular dance culture is more vibrant, innovative, and authentic than the cultural scene associated with white, middle-class America: "...street dancing is black. The only thing that I've seen that's been original in the white scene is punk. I don't see white middle-class kids coming up with dances! I consider street dancing what [Basil's dance collaborators] Spazz Attack does, what Shabadoo does: they're people on the streets that learn it from the streets." Linda Tomko, "Some History on Toni Basil's 'Street,'" *Los Angeles Times* (18 April 1982). In this interview, Basil singles out punk as the only original style emerging from white youth subculture in the early 1980s. Basil herself was quasi-punk, and during the late 1970s, was the first to invite Bruce Conner to the legendary San Francisco punk music venue, Mabuhay Gardens, where she introduced him to the avant-punk band DEVO, whom he later collaborated with through his film, MONGOLOID (1981).

²⁰⁵ Basil's current dance activities can be viewed on her personal YouTube channel, "Toni Basil's House": <http://www.youtube.com/user/ToniBasilsHouse>.

Positioning Basil as the bridge between BREAKAWAY and *The T.A.M.I. Show* helps illuminate how the colliding forces of the avant-garde and the entertainment industry resulted in mutual exchanges between both realms. Unsurprisingly, most critical accounts of BREAKAWAY have not focused on its relationship to mid-1960s popular culture, but instead, on its belated influence on the promotional music video genre, particularly the MTV aesthetic that became popular in the early 1980s.²⁰⁶ Yet, this recurring tendency to position Conner's films, along with those of fellow avant-garde filmmakers like Kenneth Anger and Harry Smith, as "proto-music videos," risks an uncritical alignment of their work with the profit-generating industrial productions of the recording industry. Specifically, in the case of BREAKAWAY, the "proto-music video" moniker forecloses more multi-dimensional and historically specific modes of inquiry. As argued throughout this study, what is most interesting about Conner's films is not simply that he "got there first," but that his work resists prescribed critical taxonomies, traditionally conceived genres, and accepted historical genealogies.

In the conclusion to his influential study of postwar avant-garde film, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*, David E. James presents an especially bleak assessment of the culture industry's nearly complete absorption of 1960s underground cinematic practices in the interests of capitalist accumulation: "The dystopian integration of contemporary film in a totalized industrial system, existing at a higher logical level than any one medium within it, is the

²⁰⁶ In a 1983 *Film Comment* article, David Ehrenstein discussed Conner's films in terms of their influence on MTV, stating: "Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* and Bruce Conner's *A MOVIE* have likewise served as iceboxes raided at midnight by sensibilities far simpler than theirs," and later, "After all, wasn't Conner a chief architect of the form in his 1967 [sic] opus *Breakaway*? That brief bit of sound and fury featured the voice and image of a young dancer then known as Antonia Christina Basil. Fifteen years later, she was to return with a more abbreviated moniker—Toni Basil—singing and dancing to Number One with *Micky* [sic]. *Ou sont les go-go danseurs d'anton?*" Similarly, David E. James lists COSMIC RAY and *Scorpio Rising*, as well as the abstract avant-garde films of Harry Smith, as progenitors of MTV music video. Conner's "punk" films of the late 1970s and early 1980s—MONGOLOID (1978), made for the avant-punk group Devo, and AMERICA IS WAITING (1982) and MEA CULPA (1982), made for two tracks off of David Byrne and Brian Eno's album *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*—are also considered prime examples of avant-garde innovations in the music video format. These films are discussed in more depth in the conclusion.

context in which we inherit the traces of sixties cinemas.”²⁰⁷ For James, the rise of television music video in the 1980s is among the foremost examples of this “dystopian integration” of avant-garde cinema and industrialized cultural production, at the expense of the former’s utopian aspirations and subversive potential. James’s observation that the MTV music video has shamelessly exploited avant-garde and “alternative” cinematic practices rings true, today more than ever. Conner would have certainly agreed with James’s critical appraisal of corporate capitalism’s triumph over and incorporation of 1960s utopianism, and shared in his dismay at MTV’s poaching of countercultural aesthetics.²⁰⁸

Nevertheless, as much the reductive “proto-music video” classification fails to capture BREAKAWAY’s fusion of avant-garde technique, psychedelic visuality, “pop” sincerity, and 1960s-specific utopian optimism—a historically expanded definition of the music video genre can offer a generative frame of reference for avant-garde films, especially when the genre is not post-dated to the debut of MTV in 1981. In fact, the origins of the music video date back at least as far as the 1940s, when “Soundies,” or short musical films often featuring big-band performances and vaudeville-esque variety routines, were projected in specially designed

²⁰⁷ James continues: “The backside of the pornography industries, music videos exploited all of underground film’s stylistic innovations—surrealist motifs; the representation of marginal and criminal subcultures; the fracturing of diegetic time and space; rapid cutting and nonlinear, nonlogical editing; and especially the denaturing of representations within the materiality of the photographic image. But rather than mobilizing either aesthetic or political alternatives, or articulating a decentralized practice or other difference from the industry, all these stylistic elements were rewritten in the codes of television commercials, finally to find a place in the industrialized consensus, a global farce in which the simulacra of social otherness or resistance stood in as advertisements for their actual impossibility.” David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1989): 350-1.

²⁰⁸ In a July 2001 conversation with Scott MacDonald, Conner remarked with dismay: “Particularly nowadays there are so many people doing music videos and other films that are secondary and tertiary imitations of my films—using footage from other people’s films and other people’s music.” Conversation reprinted in *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008): 254.

jukeboxes that could be found in spaces of leisure across the United States.²⁰⁹ During the 1960s, the jukebox musical film was updated with the more technologically sophisticated “Scopitone,” a hybrid of sight (“scopi-“) and sound (“-tone”). Scopitone films typically feature dynamic, fast-paced editing, teams of scantily-clad female dancers, stylized stage sets and more “cinematic” narrative scenarios, like a beach party or unrequited teenage love—in this sense, they came closer to the style and content of contemporary music videos than the Soundies, which were more “vaudevillian” in style.

The style and tone of Scopitone films ranged from sentimental kitsch to outrageously campy.²¹⁰ A classic example of the latter tendency is Joi Lansing’s “The Web of Love” from 1966, which pushes all of the basic generic elements of a Scopitone film to the brink of absurdity. In the film, Lansing, a buxom C-list performer, finds herself in a series of “jungle” scenarios that literally illustrate the song’s lyrics; while singing that she feels trapped “like a bird in a cage,” she wears feathered wings and is imprisoned behind metal bars; when comparing love to “a big

²⁰⁹ Dudley Murphy, the lesser-known American filmmaker who made *Ballet Mécanique* with Fernand Léger in 1924, went on to direct at least ten “Soundies” while living in Los Angeles during the 1940s. Murphy’s involvement in Soundies prompts David James’s remark that “African American music has been overwhelmingly influential on American culture as a whole but especially on avant-garde film.” In *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*, 253.

²¹⁰ In Susan Sontag’s influential 1964 essay “Notes on Camp,” she includes Scopitones in her laundry list of archetypal camp artifacts (just as Clement Greenberg had supplied examples of “kitsch” in his seminal essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” published in the same journal, *Partisan Review*, exactly twenty-five years earlier). The fact that Sontag included Scopitones on her list indicates the immediate impact this imported technology had on mainstream American culture, evident even to a member of the elite urban intelligentsia. What qualified Scopitones as an ideal example of “camp” was not so much its elaborate viewing apparatus—the bulky, coin-operated jukebox-like contraption—and more the actual films themselves: low-budget productions that could range from wholesome bubblegum pop to outrageous, racy Technicolor pageantry. Sontag’s essay serves as a manifesto on the cultural phenomenon of camp, and also launched the young writer’s career as a cultural critic. In it, she defines camp as a collection of material objects, iconic personalities, and texts, as well as a particular attitude and mode of reception towards this cultural field. Camp is characterized by artificiality, exaggeration, bad taste, and it is closely aligned with, but not equivalent to, a homosexual aesthetic. Importantly, Sontag argues that camp cannot be *intentional*, rather, it is an unintended side effect of something created earnestly, but sets its aims at high culture and drastically misses its mark, descending into absurdity and kitsch. Additional evidence of the immediate recognition of Scopitones as camp artifacts is their frequent mention in a peculiar little book celebrating the camp sensibility, Niles Chignon, ed., *The Camp Followers’ Guide!* (New York: Avon Books, 1965).

witch doctor who stirred a brew for me,” she sits naked in an enormous cauldron while a leering, loin-clothed man stirs the steaming liquid. Compared to their American cousins, French-language Scopitones were often relatively subtle affairs, though their obvious attempts to translate American youth culture for French consumers nevertheless reinforce their status as camp. One French Scopitone with a particular formal resemblance to *BREAKAWAY* is “Les Bôîtes à Gogo” from 1966, starring a young Québécoise chanteuse named Michèle Richard. In the film, Richard is shown dancing in a nightclub amongst a bevy of glamorous young hipsters. Like them, she is decked out in quintessential “mod” style, wearing an Op art-inspired, geometric print black and white dress. The film features zooming close-ups on Richard’s face and the dancers’ bodies, choppy editing, disorienting camera angles, and a mobile camera that weaves across the dance floor, as if to capture the experience of being in an authentic “bôîtes à gogo.” Though a performance like Richard’s is wholesome in comparison to Lansing’s cheesecake, there is a latent sexual energy contained within both films, due to the nature of this short-lived medium of commercial entertainment, which depended on the aroused gaze of a presumed male spectator.

If one were to combine Richard’s charm and sincerity with a touch of Lansing’s risqué behavior, the result, I believe, would approximate Basil’s performance in *BREAKAWAY*. However, it would be more accurate to imagine *BREAKAWAY* not as a pastiche or parody of a Scopitone so much as a loosely-informed experimental re-interpretation. Originally developed in France in the early 1960s, the Scopitone made its U.S. debut in 1964—the same year that witnessed the triple convergence of music, dance, and cinema embodied in both *The T.A.M.I. Show* and in Basil and Conner’s first round of collaboration.²¹¹ Even though Conner never

²¹¹ Scopitones were first developed in France after World War II, when a group of film enthusiasts took surplus cameras that were originally designed for high-altitude war reconnaissance and converted them into film projectors.

directly referenced Scopitones in interviews or in writing, jukebox musical films were sufficiently popular during the mid-1960s that we can assume that he was aware of their existence.²¹² Moreover, as a professional choreographer, dancer, and soon-to-be pop singer active in Los Angeles when Scopitones debuted, Basil would have been aware of the new medium's impact on the entertainment industry.²¹³ Yet, importantly, *BREAKAWAY* was produced for a select audience of artist-friends rather than for an anonymous public of consumers, and therefore did not serve a purely promotional function in the manner of a Scopitone film. Nevertheless, Scopitones provide a more historically appropriate frame of reference for *BREAKAWAY* than

By the late fifties, engineers had designed a rotating carousel that could accommodate a variety of short 16mm films, which could then be individually selected and queued up by the viewer. The coin-operated Scopitone machines that finally premiered in France in 1960 were stocked with high-quality Technicolor films with magnetic soundtracks for superior audio quality. When the machines first arrived in the U.S. in 1964, most of the available films featured French pop stars like Serge Gainsbourg, Johnny Hallyday and Françoise Hardy. American record companies quickly recognized a market for films featuring more familiar American pop stars, and began to invest in elaborate Scopitone productions for Nancy Sinatra, Neil Sedaka, Lou Rawls, Della Reese, January Jones, The Hondells, Debbie Reynolds (co-owner of the US distributor of Scopitone films, Harman-nee Productions) amongst others pop stars. Between 1960 and 1967, over 700 Scopitone films were produced in France and North America. During their heyday in the mid-1960s, Scopitone jukeboxes could be found in bars, airport lounges, bowling alleys, and other spaces of leisure across the U.S. and in Europe. Although they rapidly fell out of favor towards the end of the decade, Scopitone machines and films are today considered collectibles and are eagerly sought after by a small community of enthusiasts. For more on Scopitone films, see David Serlin, "The Clean Room/Love Machines: Unwinding the Technology of the Scopitone," *Cabinet Magazine* no. 2 (Spring 2001), accessed at <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/2/cleanroom.php>. Also see Jack Stevenson, "The Jukebox That Ate the Cocktail Lounge: The Story of Scopitone," in *Land of a Thousand Balconies: Discoveries and Confessions of B-Movie Archaeologist* (Manchester, UK: Headpress/Critical Vision, 2003), 31–46. The Scopitone was actually predated by an Italian version of the cinematic jukebox, called the Cinebox, which never achieved the same degree as success as the Scopitone in the U.S. For a detailed history of the Cinebox, see Michele Bovi, *Da Carosone a Cosa Nostra: Gli Antenati Del Videoclip* (Rome: Coniglio Editore, 2007). For a historical and theoretical reading of the relationship between Soundies and Scopitones, see Amy Herzog, "Illustrating Music: The Impossible Embodiments of the Jukebox Film," in *Medium Cool: Music Videos from Soundies to Cellphones*, ed. Roger Beebe and Jason Middleton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 30–58.

²¹² After the Scopitone's debut in the U.S., the technology was almost immediately adopted by the sex industry for projecting "peepshows" in strip clubs and sex shops. Stevenson notes that one San Francisco establishment, Big Al's Topless Strip Club, took the new technology to its logical conclusion in 1966 when it produced four "topless Scopitones," short pornographic films that featured campy titles like *Batgirl* and *Topless a Go Go*. Keeping in mind Conner's use of soft-core pornographic imagery in his assemblages, and his inclusion of "girlie movies" in *A MOVIE* and *MARILYN TIMES FIVE*, it is possible that the longtime San Francisco resident witnessed one of Big Al's locally-produced topless films. See Stevenson, 32.

²¹³ After I showed Ms. Basil a number of Scopitones from the 1960s, she recognized many of the female back-up dancers as women she had frequently worked with during this period. She did not recall performing in or choreographing any Scopitone films herself, though she did work on numerous low budget Hollywood productions during this period.

the anachronistic imposition of MTV music video. Considering the longer history of music video helps illuminate how the proleptic coincidence of Basil's later fame as a MTV one-hit-wonder has resulted in an overdetermined interpretation of *BREAKAWAY* as eternally "proto-," to the detriment of a more thorough understanding of the film's complex interconnections with the popular culture of its own historical moment.

Besides the genre of promotional music film, *BREAKAWAY* was also clearly in dialogue with contemporary innovations in the field of avant-garde cinema. Most notably, Conner's use of flicker invites a comparison with contemporaneous "flicker films," which are conventionally interpreted as examples of "structural film," including Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (1960), Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966), and the entire 1960s output of Paul Sharits. Such comparisons illuminate the uniqueness of Conner's film. For instance, Conrad's *The Flicker* is a thirty-minute film entirely made up of alternating black and white frames and accompanied by a soundtrack of buzzing, stereophonic reverb. Conrad arranged the film frames in specific patterns (forty seven frames total) and experimented with different frame rates (from twenty-four to three times per second) in order to maximize the hallucinatory effects of stroboscopic light on the viewer, or, as he described in 1966, to produce a "psychophysical reaction."²¹⁴ In pushing visual perception to its limits in an attempt to manipulate consciousness, *The Flicker* engaged contemporary scientific and critical media discourses on feedback loops,

²¹⁴ Tony Conrad, in an interview with Jonas Mekas from March 1966, reprinted in Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 228. The fact that this "psychophysical reaction" could be unpleasant, even potentially dangerous, led Conrad to include an alarming handwritten disclaimer at the beginning of the film, which warns of the possibility of "epileptic seizure" or "physical or mental injury." Indeed, during the initial screenings of the film at the New York Cinémathèque in 1966, a physician was present in the theatre in case of emergency.

neurophysiology, and particularly, the increasing capacity of modern technology to dominate and determine human psychology.²¹⁵

On the contrary, Conner's interest in flicker was based more on his fascination with the *aesthetics of movement* than on physiological and psychological manipulation. This is especially evident in *BREAKAWAY*, where Conner uses flicker to prolong the perception of stillness between shots in the opening sequence, establishing the discontinuous flow of movement that will characterize the rest of the film. Because the film maintains the referential component of Basil's dancing body, it does not qualify as a "pure" flicker like Conrad's. Instead, the flickering shots of Basil's energetic movements are meant to intensify the perception of stillness and blackness, to disrupt the illusion of movement, and heighten the viewing experience into a visually pleasurable psychedelic "trip." Where Conrad enacts a disorienting cognitive exercise through minimal means, Conner uses flicker as just one tool in his arsenal of "maximal" aesthetic effects, in his pursuit of a near-excess of visual and sonic experience.

²¹⁵ For Conrad, *The Flicker* was a kind of perceptual "tool" for achieving near-total physiological and psychological control over the viewer, while simultaneously heightening the viewer's awareness of her lack of mastery over the viewing scenario. Optimally, this realization would enable the demystification of the filmic apparatus and thus liberate the viewer from perceptual passivity. But, as art historian Branden Joseph points out, this process of demystification can only occur if the viewer submits to the film's unpleasant, disorienting and possibly even harmful effects. Joseph acknowledges the imbalanced power dynamic inherent to such an encounter: "As a process that asserts itself as not fully of the viewing subject, *The Flicker* would seem to question one's sense of autonomy as much as it confirms it." (Joseph, 299) Joseph situates Conrad's film within the "post-Cagean milieu" of the 1960s avant-garde, a diverse field of artistic practices including structural film, conceptual art, minimalism, and postmodern music and dance. Clearly, Conner shared some common ground with the "post-Cagean" avant-garde, especially an interest in chance operations, audience reception, and "theatricality" in art. Yet his aesthetic aims were wholly different, as his use of flicker effects demonstrates. In films like *REPORT* and *BREAKAWAY*, Conner deploys flicker as a representational, impressionistic even quasi-narrative tool for visualizing and metaphorizing oppositional forces, such as light vs. darkness, stillness vs. movement, spirit vs. matter, and particularly, sex (and life) vs. death. To the contrary, Conrad, in keeping with the "structural" tendency, deployed flicker as a strictly "optical" exercise in order to exert pressure on the film medium via a self-reflexive critique. Just as in my discussion of *A MOVIE* in Chapter One and *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* in Chapter Two, *BREAKAWAY* is yet another example of how Conner's films are both in dialogue with and yet fundamentally at odds with the pursuits of "structural" film—at least, according to the taxonomy described by Sitney. See Branden Joseph, "The Flicker," in *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 279-352.

When asked about his reasons for using flicker, Conner described it as a strategy for exploiting the inherent weaknesses in human vision in order to produce “a Ringling Brothers three-ring circus” of visual perception, or, in other words, psychedelic vision—the “retinal circus” described in *The Psychedelic Experience*.²¹⁶ Elsewhere, Conner explained his use of stroboscopic effects through reference to cinema’s illusion of movement and the perceptual impact of the cinematic apparatus on the eye and the brain:

The motion picture has twenty-four different pictures in a second. In between each of them, the screen is black. And by retaining that image from one picture to another, your eye experiences the illusion of motion, whereas it is in actuality a series of still photographs. It has a stroboscopic effect. The stroboscope creates patterns and colors by interference with the brain waves. Whenever you look at any black-and-white or almost any contrasting image, a certain amount of that impression is kept on the retina of the eyeball. Look at a bright light and look away, and you see a negative image of it. So, as almost an analogy with photography, the eye is continually registering images, both positive and negative.²¹⁷

Here, Conner invokes two well-known optical phenomena that are frequently cited in discussions on flicker film: the retinal afterimage and the persistence of vision. Since the early 19th century, these two optical phenomena have circulated within discourses on visual perception as the basis for the perception of movement, and they gained even more theoretical ground with the advent of motion pictures.²¹⁸

²¹⁶ Conner continued in his explanation of the perception of movement as follows: “Sometimes an image appears on the screen for just a fraction of a second. If, immediately following, there is a series of black frames, then that image has more of an impact and is memorable. A series of images, all very different from one another, [lasting] for one or two frames each, creates a multiplicity similar to a double exposure, a multiple exposure, a multiscreen effect, or an event where many things exist at one time.” See Peter Boswell, “Theatre of Light and Shadow,” in *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story, Part II*, 54.

²¹⁷ Oral history interview with Bruce Conner, 1973 Apr. 16, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

²¹⁸ Even though many noted scientists and theorists have since rejected the idea that there is some connection between these optical phenomena and the illusion of movement in cinema, numerous reputable publications continue to invoke these outmoded concepts in discussions of film and motion. See Joseph Anderson and Barbara Fisher, “The Myth of the Persistence of Vision,” *Journal of the University Film Association*, XXX: 4 (Fall, 1978), 3-8, and a follow-up article, “The Myth of Persistence of Vision Revisited,” *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Spring 1993), 3-12.

Beyond Conner's invocation of 19th-century theories of opticality, BREAKAWAY also reflects the influence of proto-and early cinematic aesthetics, especially through its emphasis on rhythmic variation—exemplified by the contrast between Basil's flickering “speed-posing,” blurry, accelerated spins, and graceful slow-motion leaps. BREAKAWAY is not only reminiscent of filmed versions of the *Serpentine Dance*, but also of the flickering contingencies of Thomas Edison's proto-cinematic device, the kinoscope, insofar as its varied frame rates mimic the changing speeds of the hand-cranked technology.²¹⁹ Basil's spectral, smeared appearance throughout the film also recalls the popular late 19th-century genre of spirit photography, which purportedly revealed ghostly visitations during séances. In particular, during the “backwards,” second half of BREAKAWAY, when Basil's flamboyant choreography and assertive vocals are rendered nonsensical, uncanny, even possessed, one is reminded of turn-of-the-century representations of epileptics and the mentally ill, who were sometimes pictured in their underwear or stripped nude, and filmed against empty, black backgrounds to promote a sense of scientific objectivity.²²⁰ Although the playful spontaneity of BREAKAWAY would seem at odds with such haunting imagery of ghosts and mental patients, such macabre allusions lie just beneath the film's surface, threatening to erupt during the film's uncanny reprise.

In her book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, film theorist and historian Mary Ann Doane discusses how proto- and early cinematic discourses and technologies reflect deep-seated

²¹⁹ A popular device during the 1880s and 1890s, the kinoscope allowed the viewer to manually control the speed of the film, as if to simulate the experience of shooting footage with a camera. Short films of dancers (like Edison's dancing cowboys) and even soft-core erotic films were common viewing fare.

²²⁰ Famous instances of this genre of medical photography include Walter G. Chase's unflinching 1905 films of seizure patients, and the infamous photographic archive of the late 19th-century French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, whose studies of female “hysterics” helped reinforce the medical and social pathologization of female sexuality, and exerted a strong influence on Freud's theories of trauma and repression. For more on Charcot's photographs, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

anxieties over the human ability to accurately perceive or represent movement.²²¹ One theorist she focuses on is Paul Souriau, a late 19th-century neo-Kantian aesthetician, who argued that the persistence of the afterimage on the retina *precludes* the possibility of an accurate representation of movement. Instead, Souriau believed that the afterimage deposited a “visible wake” on the retina, an effect that Doane describes as the “existential tracing of an object’s movement in time.”²²² Souriau’s solution to the problem of representing movement was to advocate for the *sketch*, a mode of artistic representation that translates the blurriness and illegibility of perceived motion into the execution and facture of the representation itself. In his discussion of the sketch, Souriau describes how an artist sketching a dancing woman “imagines this feminine body coming and going, an ‘unseizable ghost.’”²²³ Indeed, this evocative image of a dancing female form as an “unseizable ghost” is immediately reminiscent of Basil’s spectral form in BREAKAWAY (fig. 3.7).

After discussing Souriau, Doane looks decades ahead to the work of the Italian Futurist photographer, Anton Giulio Bragaglia, whose theory of “photodynamism” emphasized the blurry indistinctness of photographed movement as an indication of the inevitable dematerialization of an object in motion (fig. 3.8). While photographing moving forms, Bragaglia would allow the camera shutter to remain open in order to register the object’s “visible wake,” that very same diaphanous blur in the perceptual field that troubled Souriau. Bragaglia, along with other Futurist

²²¹ Doane focuses on the relationship between early photographic and cinematic technologies and the intellectual, artistic, and scientific thought of the early modern period. In her discussion of the theory of the “afterimage,” Doane contrasts it with theory of the index developed by the late 19th-century American semiotician and Pragmatist philosopher Charles S. Peirce. Both theories, Doane argues, “circulate around the question of the accessibility of the present in representation,” and as such, interest in them stemmed from persisting anxieties about the human perception of time and space, anxieties that, she claims, characterized the dawn of modernity. Mary Ann Doane. *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, and the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 70.

²²² Doane, 89.

²²³ Doane, 84.

artists, preferred to sacrifice the representational legibility of the object in order to allow for the *sensation* of motion through space—in Doane’s words, the Futurists “fully embraced illegibility as a necessary effect and as the pure signifier of speed and mobility.”²²⁴

Despite important differences in their approach to aesthetic representation—the draughtman’s sketch versus the “photodynamic” motion study—Doane concludes that Souriau and Bragaglia shared “a theory of vision as the imprint/tracing of a trajectory or visible wake,” and, in both cases, their theories were founded upon a belief in the phenomena of the afterimage and the persistence of vision. The fact that Conner inherited this antiquated discourse on the representation of movement is evident in his cinematic rendering of Basil’s body as a spectral, smeared afterimage, reminiscent of both Souriau’s remark about the “unseizable ghost” of the dancing female and of the photographic blurs and smears of Bragaglia’s motion studies.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the Futurists were outspoken fans of the *Serpentine Dance*, but not for the same reasons as the Symbolists. As Elizabeth Coffman describes in her essay on Loïe Fuller, in the “Manifesto of the Futurist Dance” from 1917, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti proudly declares that in defiance of the cold abstractions of modernist choreography, “We Futurists prefer Loïe Fuller and the Negroes’ ‘cakewalk’ (making use of electric light and mechanical devices).”²²⁵ Marinetti’s pairing of Fuller’s luminous electric dance with an African American vernacular form (both of which were popular acts on the vaudeville stage and in early films) underscores the implicit connection between mass culture and “otherness”— blackness

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ See “Futurist Dance,” in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Critical Writings: New Edition* (Macmillan, 2007). For more on Fuller’s connection to both the Futurists and to Charcot’s theories of female hysteria, see Elizabeth Coffman, “Women in Motion: Loïe Fuller and the ‘Interpenetration’ of Art and Science,” *Camera Obscura* 17, no. 1 49 (January 1, 2002), 73–105.

and femininity—in opposition to high modernism’s white, male, heteronormativity.²²⁶

Marinetti’s rejection of high modernism’s elitist sensibilities in favor of these mass cultural “others” provides a historical avant-garde precedence for Conner and Basil’s activation of popular cultural energies through their joint participation in the entertainment industry and avant-garde cinema.

Inasmuch as *BREAKAWAY* is a product of collaboration, it is also portrait of one of Conner’s close female friends, and could be viewed alongside two other film portraits Conner made during this same period, *VIVIAN* (1964), featuring Vivian Kurz, and *THE WHITE ROSE* (1967), featuring Jay DeFeo. In a post-screening of Conner’s films at the 1968 Flaherty Film Seminar, an unidentified audience member asked the filmmaker why he made “that film about the girl,” by which he meant Vivian Kurz, the subject of *VIVIAN*.²²⁷ Conner responded, “Vivian is a very good friend of mine. I only make films about people I love.”²²⁸ But, as demonstrated in *A MOVIE* and *COSMIC RAY*, Conner also made films about his foremost fears and anxieties, especially female sexuality, death, war, and nuclear apocalypse. Likewise, Conner’s early films

²²⁶ This dialectical relationship between mass culture and modernism is discussed in a number of classic essays, including Thomas Crow, “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts,” *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (Yale University Press, 1998), 3-38; and Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), particularly in the sections on “The Vanishing Other: Mass Culture,” which includes an analysis on Adorno’s critique of jazz, as well as the frequently cited essay “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other.”

²²⁷ After making *VIVIAN* with Conner in Boston and San Francisco in 1964, Kurz went on to appear in a number of underground films, including George Kuchar’s *Corruption of the Damned* (1965), and as the lead role in Andrew Meyer’s fairytale-like portrait of life inside Warhol’s Factory, *Match Girl* (1966). In his program notes for a screening of the film, curator Ed Halter describes the *Match Girl* as “based on the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, a dreamlike parable and critique of life in The Factory, featuring cameos from Andy Warhol and Gerard Malanga, Vivian Kurz as analog for Edie Sedgwick, and a pop soundtrack by The Rolling Stones and Martha & The Vandellas.”

²²⁸ Post-screening discussion with Conner at the 1968 Flaherty Film Seminar, published as “Bruce Conner,” *Film Comment* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1969), 20.

mobilize the same set of dialectical tensions—affection and horror, desire and revulsion, liberation and containment—that animate his fraught portraits of the women he loved.²²⁹

In *VIVIAN*, the camera follows Kurz as she walks through a gallery exhibition of Conner’s assemblages and paintings. At various times, she is shown lying down inside one of the gallery’s glass cases, as if she is one of the works in the exhibition (fig. 3.9). Contained, lying prone, and displayed, she seems more mummified than sculptural. Later, when she roams free outside the glass case, she continues to be depicted as an object of aesthetic delectation before the camera, rather than as a living, breathing, autonomous subject. When describing the film at the Flaherty, Conner noted that the relationship he formed with Vivian during the making of the film had threatened his marriage, stating, “I shot some film of Vivian in her room where she lived and we were very good friends. Then life became very difficult with Vivian and became very difficult with my wife... when I could not see Vivian I made that film. I looked at Vivian everyday.”²³⁰ Making *VIVIAN* enabled Conner to continue a (primarily visual) relationship with Vivian, even after their physical relationship had ceased.

Conner’s choice of soundtrack, Conway Twitty’s 1959 cover of the hit song “Mona Lisa,” adds multiple layers of meaning to the film’s otherwise straightforward portraiture.²³¹ “Mona Lisa” tells of a woman so beautiful and yet enigmatic that her humanity is called into question, with the plaintive lyrics: “Are you warm, are you real Mona Lisa? Or just a cold and lovely,

²²⁹ In the 1980s, feminist film theorists including Mary Ann Doane and Kaja Silverman utilized the rhetoric of containment to describe cinematic techniques through which the female body and voice are “contained,” controlled, and symbolically castrated. See Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), and Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror the Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).

²³⁰ “Bruce Conner,” *Film Comment* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1969), 22.

²³¹ “Mona Lisa” was a popular song that was covered by various singers during the 1950s, including Nat King Cole, Elvis Presley and Willie Nelson. Twitty’s version was released in 1959. It was originally written for the film *Captain Carey, U.S.A.* by songwriters Ray Evans and Jay Livingston, and received an Academy Award for Best Original Song in 1950.

lonely work of art?” An earlier version of the song sung by Nat King Cole makes an uncredited appearance in Alfred Hitchcock’s famous examination of male scopophilia, *Rear Window* (1954). The song plays during a memorable scene in which the film’s voyeuristic protagonist, photographer L.B. Jeffries (Jimmy Stewart) scrutinizes his unwitting female neighbors. Safely situated behind the zoom-lens of his camera and within the confines of his unlit living room, Jeffries remains unseen by the women he unselfconsciously surveys, whose comparatively well-lit apartments resemble small film sets or the miniaturized rooms of a dollhouse. His visual field is populated by a range of typecast female characters, including his girlfriend, the “too perfect” Lisa, played by an ethereally beautiful Grace Kelly; the desperate spinster, dubbed “Miss Lonely Hearts”; “Miss Torso,” the showgirl and unwitting exhibitionist who is the recurring object of Jeffries’ prurient gaze; and finally, the infirm wife of a suspected murderer. *Rear Window* thus enacts multiple registers of female containment, with women framed by Jefferies’ windowpane, his camera lens, and the architecture of their own apartments. Like the singer of “Mona Lisa,” it is difficult for Jefferies to distinguish whether these women are just “lovely, lonely works of art” or living, breathing, unruly subjectivities. He is especially suspicious of Lisa, his own personal “Mona Lisa,” in whom he demonstrates a blatant lack of interest, that is, until she crosses the courtyard and enters the apartment of the suspected killer. By inserting herself into the frame of the eponymous “rear window,” Lisa insists on becoming part of Jefferies’ fetishized visual field—paradoxically, it is only at this distance does he begin to view her as potentially “real,” and not just a “lonely work of art.”

In VIVIAN, the female body is similarly framed and contained by the glass of the display case and the lens of the (male) photographer’s camera, while the lyrics of “Mona Lisa” once again suggest that the woman is less “real” than a fetishized object, whose “to-be-looked-at-ness”

(to borrow Laura Mulvey's famous phrase) overrides and subsumes her subjectivity, soliciting a mastering gaze rather than identification.²³² By forging an analogy between Vivian and an artwork in his own exhibition, Conner enacts a fantasy in which her body becomes a kind of raw material, an object of his look and subject to his authorial control. Yet, just like Jeffries (the voyeur) it is only after Kurz appears before his camera that Conner (the scopophiliac) begins to question her object status, yearn for her presence, and come to terms with her as an autonomous subject outside of his control and beyond his reach.

In 1967, Conner made another film about a woman he loved, but this time, she was a fellow artist with whom he felt a strong affinity, Jay DeFeo. Conner befriended DeFeo and her husband, Wally Hedrick, when he first moved to San Francisco in 1957, the year before DeFeo began her massive painting, *The Rose* (1958-1966), the work that consumed her life for almost a decade, and prompted health problems that forced her to stop painting for many years.²³³ When the work was removed from DeFeo's studio in 1965, it weighed an astonishing 2300 pounds. Conner documented the removal of the painting, and the result is a moving meditation on art, love, and loss—*THE WHITE ROSE* (1967). In the film, DeFeo's body is multiply enframed—by her mandala-like painting, which she is shown lying atop before its removal (fig. 3.10), and later, by the windows of her studio, as she witnesses her life's work being carried away. The film's soundtrack, Miles Davis's "Sketches of Spain," adds a melancholic poignancy to the film's narrative of artistic bereavement.

²³² See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

²³³ In 2012, "The White Rose" was the focal point of a retrospective of DeFeo's work that was exhibited at The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and The Whitney Museum of American Art. See Dana Miller, ed., *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective* (New York; New Haven: Whitney Museum of American Art; Distributed by Yale University Press, 2012).

Though Conner frequently depicts DeFeo's body as "contained" within the confining space of the studio and the frame of her painting, her portrayal in *THE WHITE ROSE* is nevertheless steeped in empathy and compassion, in contrast to the fetishistic desire that he unabashedly projects onto Kurz in *VIVIAN*. Whereas *VIVIAN* shows us a conventional object of desire and erotic spectacle, DeFeo appears in *THE WHITE ROSE* as more of an artistic equal and colleague. Conner's depiction of Basil in *BREAKAWAY* oscillates between the approaches to female representation taken in these two films. More of a collaborative endeavor than pure portraiture, *BREAKAWAY* unites desire and identification within the unruly figure of Basil's flickering body as it flits in and out of legibility, in and out of the containing dimensions of the film frame, of rational time and space, at once inviting and defying the gaze and its insatiable drive for visual pleasure and mastery.

Besides his "portraits of women," the other key conceptual and aesthetic precedents for *BREAKAWAY* are the films discussed in the previous two chapters: *A MOVIE* (1958), *COSMIC RAY* (1961), and *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* (1959-1967). Following from the latter two works, *BREAKAWAY* represents an advance in Conner's "psychedelic" cinematic style, especially through its use of hypnotic strobe, "subliminal" effects, and virtuosic rhythmic montage—techniques that would lay the groundwork for his participation in psychedelic light shows. Indeed, Conner recalled using brief portions of *BREAKAWAY* as film projections during his light show performances, a fact that further confirms the film's inherent generic connection to contemporary pop music performance.

BREAKAWAY also develops themes that were first explored in *COSMIC RAY*, especially through their shared reference to black music. We might also draw a parallel between Basil's recording of a "blue-eyed-soul" track and Conner's cross-racial identification with

Charles in COSMIC RAY; in both cases, a white artist harnesses racial “otherness” as a sign of creative authenticity and passionate feeling, or put simply, “soul.” Likewise, Basil’s dance in BREAKAWAY resembles a more skilled version of Beth Pewther’s nude shimmying, the erotic spectacle that Conner cheekily suggested might resuscitate Charles’s lost vision. Thus, in both BREAKAWAY and COSMIC RAY, music and dance work together to provide access to African American culture and its accompanying myths of authenticity and artistic, sexual, psychological liberation.

At the same time, BREAKAWAY also marks an important evolution in Conner’s understanding of the signifying power of female sexuality. In COSMIC RAY, Pewther’s dance is repeatedly interrupted by rapid cross-cuts with found footage of accidental catastrophes and military violence, contrasts that were intended to alert the viewer that the flip-side of sexual freedom is death and destruction (however remote or ludicrous they might appear in the guise of vintage newsreels and Mickey Mouse cartoons). Likewise, in A MOVIE, the alluring Marilyn Monroe look-alike proves to be a literal “blonde bombshell,” when a mere glimpse of her through the periscope triggers an atomic explosion. Thus, in Conner’s early films, sex never goes unpunished; the figure of the sexually-available female body is situated within a binary logic, and constitutes the erotic manifestation of those same threatening forces that are destructively embodied in the image of the atomic bomb.²³⁴

BREAKAWAY’s vision of female sexuality is not governed by the same dualisms that pervade the decidedly less mature *cinema interruptus* of A MOVIE and COSMIC RAY. Unlike Conner’s earlier bombshells, Basil is not simply the object of the aroused male gaze; instead, she boldly returns the camera’s look in a performance that is at once seductive and defiant,

²³⁴ See Chapter One’s discussion of the Cold War gender politics embedded in A MOVIE and COSMIC RAY.

exhibitionistic and empowered, vulnerable yet commanding. Likewise, Basil's nude body signifies more than the symbolic *Eros* to modernity's *Thanatos*. Rather, she unites these opposing drives under the figure "the girl dancing till the end of time," a motif borrowed from classical narrative cinema.

In *Death 24x A Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, Laura Mulvey describes the dancing girl motif as a strategy for postponing "the end" in narrative cinema and promoting a sense of infinite movement and existence beyond the final film frame.²³⁵ To illustrate, Mulvey discusses the final scene of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's classic film, *The Red Shoes* (1948), which she regards as "haunted" by the absence of the eternally dancing girl. The film's protagonist, Vicky, is a ballerina who is forced to choose between the two "leading" men in her life, her husband and her controlling ballet impresario. Vicky's inability to choose between her marriage and her career compels her to commit suicide, just moments before she is supposed to appear on stage as prima ballerina in a performance of "The Red Shoes." Yet, Vicky's tragic death does not conclude the narrative. Instead, the ballet performance carries on while a spotlight shines on Vicky's empty position on stage, illuminating her absence in a manner that Mulvey says "cannot but conjure up the image of the girl dancing till the end of time."²³⁶

For Mulvey, the threat of stillness and its metonym, death, are ever-present in cinema; because inertia is the dialectical other to film's apparent motion, stillness and movement are always simultaneously present in film. In this sense, the death drive can never be fully eliminated

²³⁵ Mulvey quotes French New Wave director and critic Jacques Rivette, who distinguished between these two types of cinematic conclusions: the first wherein the narrative arrives at some kind of dramatic resolution through death, marriage or revelation, versus the alternative model, which offers only "the most banal of closing images: rivers flowing, crowds, armies, shadows passing, curtains falling in perpetuity, a girl dancing till the end of time..." Such unresolved endings insist upon the continuation of motion and life after the film concludes. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008): 72.

²³⁶ Mulvey, 76.

from the cinematic experience, just suspended, suppressed, or distracted from. Mulvey's analysis of *The Red Shoes* clarifies how *BREAKAWAY* similarly uses the motif of the "girl dancing till the end of time" to postpone conclusion and stasis (and thus, death) through the reversal of the filmstrip and soundtrack. Released from linear time and gravitational space, Basil, "the endlessly dancing girl," is propelled back to the original moment of stasis—the end as a perpetual beginning.

Whereas in *A MOVIE* and *COSMIC RAY* the spectacular eroticism of the nude female body is continuously disrupted by the disciplinary forces of military and capitalist spectacle, *BREAKAWAY* signals an ecstatic release from the oppressive limitations of "everyday" time, space, and history—instantiating a different kind of "death," a social and psychological (ego) death that is also symptomatic of psychedelic experience. Thus, in *BREAKAWAY*, the life/death dichotomy that animates Conner's earlier films is replaced with a decidedly more ambiguous, indeterminate vision of utopian possibility and sublime fulfillment, one that appears utterly at odds with the dualistic Cold War logic that dominates his earlier films.

In keeping with the definition of utopia as a "non-place," the cinematic space and time in which *BREAKAWAY* unfolds is non-descript and unquantifiable. Throughout, Basil flickers in and out of legibility, oscillating between real and ethereal, visible and invisible, as if caught in a state of becoming, at a remove from the demands of the "everyday" world. When the film is suddenly resurrected in reverse, it seems as if her song and dance may never end, and that stillness will be continuously postponed by an endless loop; this reversal constitutes the "breakaway" from the linear time of "everyday" experience called for by the title song. A classic example of the "girl dancing till the end of time," Basil's performance operates within a cyclical temporality that disrupts the *telos* of progressive film time, effectively staving off "the end" in

favor of repetition and open possibility. The screen time in which her dance unfolds is cyclical, repetitive, and thus implicitly, infinite—a radical rejection of the linear, teleological, and final.

This alternative model of cinematic time corresponds to the theory of “women’s time” formulated by psychoanalytic feminist theorist Julia Kristeva, who proposes that “Female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity* from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations.”²³⁷ Kristeva distinguishes between this feminine temporality and its opposite—the progressive, linear temporality that governs language (via the sequential enunciation of the sentence) and the project of history (as teleological). This masculine temporality, she notes, “rests on its own stumbling block, which is also the stumbling block of that enunciation [of language]—death.” Whereas Kristeva regards masculine time as structured by mortality, women’s time, she states, is structured by *natality*—the unique female capacity to reproduce. This capacity, she states, allows woman special access to *jouissance*, that (untranslatable) condition of transcendence located somewhere on the border between pleasure and pain; in some sense, then, *jouissance* is the psychoanalytic correlate for the aesthetic concept of the sublime. Psychoanalytic theorists since Lacan argue that *jouissance* is prohibited by the codes of civil society, which regulates and controls the experience of both extreme enjoyment and suffering through monitoring institutions like education, religion, and the family.²³⁸ Implicitly, then, women’s time has the potential to threaten such institutions and the patriarchal foundations upon which they rest.

²³⁷ Julia Kristeva, “Women’s Time,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 191.

²³⁸ Kristeva, 192.

Aligning Kristeva's formulation of "women's time" to the cyclical temporality at work in *BREAKAWAY* illuminates why the film's visualization of a "breakaway from the everyday" is tantamount to a demand for *jouissance*, for ecstatic release from the constraints of the "everyday" realities of social conventions, language, history, and institutions—which Basil regards as "the chains that bind." The film's pursuit of *jouissance* is activated through its reversal of the progressive flow of "historical" or "masculine" temporality, which is replaced by the repetitive, eternal temporality of the "girl dancing till the end of time." This reversal also enacts the "breakaway" from the symbolic order of language, for it is precisely when the lyrics cease to signify linguistically that the desire to "breakaway" is communicated most viscerally. The urge to reverse time, transcend history and language, and to escape (or at least postpone) the perpetual threat of mortality, thus finds expression in the film through both form and content.

Writing in 1979, Kristeva's formulation of "women's time" was part of her attempt to reconcile the aims of preceding "generations" (in Kristeva's terms, this refers less to chronological movements than "signifying spaces" or, perhaps even more simply, discourses) of feminism. Whereas the earlier, egalitarian and "rights"-focused women's movement sought entrance into "masculine" time of history and politics, the "Second Wave" sought greater recognition and understanding of female biological difference and thus, according to Kristeva, retained the option of remaining *outside* these masculine realms. In her essay, Kristeva seeks a third way, wherein the contradictions between these gendered modalities might be brought into productive alignment.

Kristeva has often been charged with essentialism due to her emphasis on biology and on the feminine maternal instinct as a natural and pre-symbolic condition; her critics insist that gender is not an ontological condition, but rather, a fluid identity that is discursively constructed

and performed.²³⁹ Indeed, Conner, like Kristeva, similarly casts non-linear, non-progressive temporality as *feminine*—specifically, as a physically active, sexually-available young white woman of reproductive age—and thus, his vision similarly hinges upon an essentialist interpretation of woman that is inextricable from female anatomical identity and the capacity for bearing children. My point here is not to indict either Conner or Kristeva for their shortcomings, but rather, to demonstrate how Kristeva’s notion of “women’s time” captures *both* the uncanny temporality at work in *BREAKAWAY*, as well as the film’s problematic essentializing of “the feminine.”

Here, the conclusion to Kristeva’s essay is worth quoting at length, if only to draw out the subtle affinities between Kristeva’s theory and Conner’s artistic project, which we could consider, appropriating Kristeva’s terms, an “aesthetic practice”:

What discourse, if not that of a religion, would be able to support this adventure which surfaces as a real possibility, after both the achievements and the impasses of the present ideological reworkings, in which feminism has participated? It seems to me that the role of what is usually called ‘aesthetic practices’ must increase not only to counterbalance the storage and uniformity of information by present-day mass media, data-bank systems, and, in particular, modern communications technology, but also to demystify the identity of the symbolic bond itself, to demystify, therefore, the *community* of language as a universal and unifying tool, one which totalizes and equalizes. In order to bring out—along with the singularity of each person, and, even more, along with the multiplicity of every person’s possible identifications (with atoms, e.g., stretching from the family to the stars)—the *relativity of his/her symbolic as well as biological existence*, according to the variation in his/her specific symbolic capacities. And in order to emphasize the responsibility which all will immediately face of putting this fluidity into play against the threats of death which are unavoidable whenever an inside and an outside, a self and an other, one group and another, are constituted. At this level of interiorization with its social as well as individual stakes, what I have called ‘aesthetic practices’ are undoubtedly nothing other than the modern reply to the eternal question of morality. At least, this is how we might understand an ethics which, conscious of the fact that its order is sacrificial, reserves part of the burden for each of its adherents, therefore declaring

²³⁹ Most notable amongst these critiques is Judith Butler’s in her groundbreaking 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

them guilty while immediately affording them the possibility for *jouissance*, for various productions, for a life made up of both challenges and differences.”²⁴⁰

Although Kristeva’s language might initially appear at odds with the accessible “pop” spirit of BREAKAWAY, there are key similarities in Kristeva and Conner’s utopian imaginaries. Kristeva envisions a future world that acknowledges both the *singularity* and “the multiplicity of every person’s possible identifications,” which she describes as an oceanic, or better yet, *cosmic* expanse of possibilities, one that originates “with atoms, e.g. stretching from the family to the stars.” Her language here is reminiscent of the trope of the “atomic sublime” that I have attempted to trace throughout Conner’s films.

Moreover, this passage posits *multiplicity*, *relativity*, and *fluidity* against the strict binaries of self vs. other; for Kristeva, these binaries inevitably result in (both a real and a symbolic) *death*: “threats of death which are unavoidable whenever an inside and an outside, a self and an other, one group and another, are constituted.” Her condemnation of binary oppositions recalls BREAKAWAY’s ethics of indeterminacy, and its subsequent disavowal of the binary oppositions (especially sex vs. death) that structure Conner’s earlier films. Kristeva imagines future aesthetic practices that disrupt such binaries, and, via a new ethics, afford access to what she describes as the specifically feminine sublime experience of *jouissance*, a mode that differs from the destructive, shattering force that Jacques Lacan ascribes to this concept. In this sense, Kristeva mirrors BREAKAWAY’s utopian aspiration to break free from the constraints of an (implicitly patriarchal) “everyday” world filled with “wagging tongues” and “twisted minds.” Fundamentally, this passage suggests that Conner and Kristeva are similarly invested in a specifically “feminine” temporality that emphasizes *becoming* over being, multiplicity over binaries, ambiguity over certainty, and the sublime over the “everyday.”

²⁴⁰ Kristeva, 210-211.

The next film that Conner and Basil were jointly involved in was Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), as described in the previous chapter. Whereas *Easy Rider* symbolically heralded the end of 1960s counterculture by violently foreclosing on that decade's utopian aspirations, *BREAKAWAY* represents Conner and Basil's investment in preserving these impulses and energies. This contrast between the two films was manifest even at their respective moments of production: while the behind-the-scenes footage seen in *PAS DE TROIS* testifies to the festive and collaborative spirit that fueled *BREAKAWAY*, *Easy Rider*'s production, in contrast, was notoriously fraught due to Hopper's drug-fueled megalomania and bullying of the cast and crew. Hopper was particularly cruel to his actors during production of the cemetery scene, berating Fonda to dredge up the emotional pain of his mother's suicide to enhance his performance, and demanding that a reluctant Basil remove all of her clothes before crawling into a tomb filled with skeletons.²⁴¹

Infamously traumatic for the actors involved, especially Basil, the cemetery "acid trip" scene is notwithstanding *Easy Rider*'s most successful attempt at using camera effects, editing, and sound to enact temporal and spatial liminality—hallmarks of Conner's psychedelic style in both *BREAKAWAY* and *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*. Yet, a comparison between Hopper and Conner's filmmaking only serves to highlight the difference between their respective visions. Whereas the cemetery provides the bikers with a temporary diversion, a final "detour" before their fatal conclusion, the emptied black void in *BREAKAWAY* provides a more optimistic vision of hopeful indeterminacy, a potentially continuous "trip" with no clear end in sight. Furthermore, unlike *BREAKAWAY*'s aligning of Basil's body with sexual and spiritual

²⁴¹ This is according to Baird Bryant, one of the cameramen who worked on *Easy Rider*. See Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock'n'Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 63-64.

liberation, *Easy Rider*'s cemetery scene proposes a direct correlation between the sexualized body of the prostitute and the threat of death embodied by the cemetery, a psychedelic updating of the medieval motif of "Death and the Maiden." Of course, Conner had himself invoked the same misogynistic theme in *COSMIC RAY*, in which sex and death are conflated in the image of a nude woman (Beth Pewther) cradling a human skull on her groin. In this sense, *BREAKAWAY* represents a maturation of Conner's attitude towards sex and death, and specifically the blatant equation between female sexuality and death that characterize the Manichean vision of Cold War paranoia in his early films.

Though Hopper's macabre misogyny stands in stark contrast to *BREAKAWAY*'s figuration of physical and psychological liberation in the form of a woman's exuberant dancing, comparing the two films also helps to illuminate how *BREAKAWAY*'s utopianism and feminism remains constricted by gendered and anatomical essentialism, in this case, through its correlation (however positive) between "natural" femininity and spiritual rejuvenation. This vision rests upon a gendered logic wherein both the flesh of the female body and the more ethereal notion of an eternal feminine principle become aligned with ideas about (pro)creativity, cyclical, non-linear temporalities, and sexual-spiritual freedom (rather than death and decay, as in Hopper's cemetery). Instead of dismissing Conner's gendered utopianism as inherently sexist and oppressive, it is important to recognize that *BREAKAWAY* is a cultural artifact bound up with its historical moment, before essentialism had been sufficiently challenged by (second wave, anti-essentialist) feminist critique.

As Tom Gunning writes in his essay on Loïe Fuller, works of historical cinema should be regarded not as failed promises, but as "forgotten utopias." Following Gunning, it is less productive to judge a film like *BREAKAWAY* for its successes or failures than to consider it in

terms of constantly shifting, expanding, and evolving conditions of possibility. Thus, even if BREAKAWAY's utopian imagination was limited by its historical and cultural moment, its political shortcomings do not necessarily negate its utopian potential and promise. As Gunning states, such a "forgotten utopia" contains promises that radiated out of the "discovery of new horizons of experience;" in the case of BREAKAWAY, these new horizons were represented by Conner's recent exploration of psychedelic experience, and the enthralling originality of 1960s popular culture.

In remembering this "forgotten utopia," it becomes clear that BREAKAWAY extended the aspirations embodied in early cinema, and especially, in Fuller's *Serpentine Dance*, by offering an even more impossible, ungraspable vision of "the art of motion." Through its cyclical temporality and vaporization of the female form, BREAKAWAY emphasizes becoming and betweenness over completion and finitude. The film's utopian vision was born specifically of the convergence of avant-garde and popular culture, but it also hinged upon the conditions of collaboration, and the asymptotic pursuit of intersubjectivity that collective authorship implies. Herein lies the latent, however flawed and unexpected, feminist potential of BREAKAWAY—Conner's rendering of the "atomic sublime" as an "eternal feminine," poised precariously on the brink between bodily dematerialization and total collapse.

If BREAKAWAY is Conner's most exuberant film, it is also his most explicitly feminist and utopian. Nevertheless, the promise extended by these potential energies are never fulfilled; Basil's "breakaway" is but a temporary release from the realities of "everyday" space and time, which are then immediately reinstated once her song and dance come to a still, however much we might want to imagine her beyond the final frame. Basil's performance does not fully liberate her from this normative regime, for her body and voice remain contained within the parameters

of the apparatus of the camera and the film frame. Indeed, by rewinding the audiovisual track at mid-point, *BREAKAWAY* could be seen to reverse Basil's progress towards liberation even as it frees her body and voice from the forward-moving flow of progressive, historical time. In this sense, *BREAKWAY* signals the provisional liberation of the female body, but ultimately, puts her "back in the can."²⁴²

In the following chapter, I examine a group of late found footage films by Conner that, like *BREAKAWAY*, similarly function as avant-garde motion studies. Like Basil's illegible body, these films similarly feature moving forms that flicker in and out of legibility due to Conner's use of unconventional temporalities and looping repetition. One of these films in particular, *MARILYN TIMES FIVE*, elaborates on the potential feminist critique embedded in *BREAKAWAY*, again by examining the eroticized female body with a curious of mix desire and (cross-gender) identification. In each of the motion studies I discuss in the next chapter, Conner flirts with the possibility of explicit signification, but ultimately denies this (epistemological) drive to know and master the image in favor of the overwhelming, visceral aesthetic experience of the sublime.

²⁴² I thank David James for reminding me of the limits of Conner's feminist vision and for his use of the helpful metaphor.

Chapter Four

Sublime Time: Found Footage Motion Studies

The previous two chapters focused on how Conner's art and film practice during the mid-1960s emphasized immediacy, improvisation, sensation, and collaboration, by harnessing the optimistic energies of popular and counter-culture alike. Through works like *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* and *BREAKAWAY*, his participation in live psychedelic light shows, and the KQED broadcast, Conner embraced the performative, the collective, and the popular over the values advocated by the high modernist criticism, such as social autonomy, medium specificity, and self-reflexivity. In short, Conner's 1960s practice let the world flood in, while still attempting to "master" it, technically, formally, and conceptually.

Conner's investment in these various forms of "expanded" practice could give the impression that he gave up working with found footage filmmaking in the mid-1960s, much as he had given up assemblage towards the beginning of the decade. In fact, there was no hiatus in his interest in found footage. On the contrary, there was an intensification of this practice. In late 1963, Conner became deeply absorbed in the creation of a found footage film that many consider exemplary of the genre, *REPORT* (1963-1967), which examines the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963 in Dallas, Texas. Conner began working on *REPORT* in the immediate aftermath of the assassination, and completed a total of eight different edits over the next four years.²⁴³ The final version released in 1967 is widely regarded as one of the most

²⁴³ Conner provided numerous details behind the production of *REPORT* in his remarks after the 1968 Flaherty Film Seminar, see "Bruce Conner," *Film Comment* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1969), 17-18. For a review of an earlier version of *REPORT* screened in 1966 at the Filmmakers' Cooperative in New York, see David Mosen, "Report by Bruce Conner," *Film Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Spring 1966), 54-56.

powerful and incisive works of ideological critique to emerge from American underground cinema, and is the most extensively analyzed of Conner's films.²⁴⁴

REPORT's significance within Conner's oeuvre is partly due to the film's iconic subject matter, the assassination of Kennedy, one in a series of shocking politically-motivated killings—Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Jr., Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.—that would dominate American headlines throughout the decade. Fifty years later, Kennedy's assassination remains a deeply traumatic episode in the American collective consciousness, one still enveloped in mystery and speculation. The lack of closure surrounding the event is related, in part, to its lack of photographic representation—with the notable exception of Abraham Zapruder's infamous Super-8 footage. This dearth of images of the assassination is even more striking when compared to the surfeit of images from Kennedy's brief presidency, a media-friendly administration starring a youthful and photogenic President and First Lady, who harnessed celebrity appeal to political advantage. REPORT takes up this representational paradox, this absent center within the (tele)visual narrative, as an opportunity to re-examine the assassination as a *mediated* experience as much as a real historical event.

In 1968, a year after completing the final version of REPORT, Conner began work on a film about the death of another iconic American, the Hollywood star and archetypal Cold War bombshell, Marilyn Monroe. Monroe was found dead of an apparent drug overdose on August 5, 1962, just over a year before the President's death. Famously, the two were rumored to be

²⁴⁴ The existing literature on REPORT is extensive; for example, see Kevin Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), 157-166; David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 157-159; Bruce Jenkins, "Bruce Conner's Report: Contesting Camelot," in *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema*, ed. Ted Perry (Indiana University Press, 2006), 236-251; Martin F. Norden, "A Report on Bruce Conner's 'Report,'" in *Underground U.S.A.: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon*, ed. Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider (Columbia University Press, 2003), 76-85. Art Simon, "Bruce Conner," in *Dangerous Knowledge: The JFK Assassination in Art and Film* (Temple University Press, 2010), 131-144.

romantically involved shortly before she died. Glamorous and tragic in equal measure, Monroe and Kennedy faced similar forms of posthumous mythologizing and exploitation, their deaths inspiring national mourning and countless, often intertwined, conspiracy theories. As with *REPORT*, Conner created multiple versions of his Monroe film—including *MARILYN TIMES THREE* and *MARILYN TIMES FOUR*—until completing the final cut, *MARILYN TIMES FIVE* (henceforth referred to as *MX5*) in 1973.²⁴⁵ Beyond these parallels in their subject matter, *REPORT* and *MX5* are further linked by their shared duration: at thirteen minutes long each, the two films form a kind of a cinematic couplet, perhaps in a nod to the alleged real-life affair.²⁴⁶ Moreover, both films deploy repetitive, disjunctive montage, film-loops, and appropriated, non-synchronous soundtracks to render their subjects enigmatic and unavailable—paradoxically, the more we see (and hear), the less familiar we become.

This strategic de-familiarization continues in Conner’s next film, *CROSSROADS* (1976), which examines another iconic image from the collective consciousness of Cold War America: the mushroom cloud. Conner’s longest and arguably his most challenging film, *CROSSROADS* re-deploys the formal devices and structural organization developed in the film-couplet of *REPORT* and *MX5* and brings them to a new level of structural austerity and conceptual sophistication. Unlike Conner’s previous filmic output, then, the “music video” moniker is less applicable to these later found footage works. Gone are the upbeat soundtracks, comic

²⁴⁵ *MARILYN TIMES THREE* and *MARILYN TIMES FOUR* utilize the same footage seen in *MARILYN TIMES FIVE*, but include fewer iterations of the looped images and soundtrack. Completed in the early 1970s, prints of these alternate, shorter versions are housed at the John M. Flaxman Library at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

²⁴⁶ Though *A MOVIE* clocks in at a full twelve minutes, the films that immediately followed—including *COSMIC RAY*, *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*, *VIVIAN*, *THE WHITE ROSE*, *BREAKAWAY*, and *PERMIAN STRATA*—all average between two-and-a-half and five minutes running time, with the exception of *THE WHITE ROSE* (Seven minutes, thirty-five seconds), *TEN SECOND FILM* (a mere ten seconds) and *LEADER*, a thirty-minute audience provocation that is no longer extant. Thus, *REPORT* and *MARILYN TIMES FIVE* were Conner’s longest films until *CROSSROADS* in 1976.

juxtapositions, and libidinous energy that animate films like COSMIC RAY, LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS, and BREAKAWAY, and even, certain points in A MOVIE. Instead, REPORT, MX5, and CROSSROADS exhibit slowed-down, deliberate rhythms, solemnity instead of playfulness, and, perhaps most importantly, they are organized according to the logic of repetition, rather than juxtaposition.

Taken together, I argue, these three films—REPORT, MX5, and CROSSROADS—comprise a trilogy wherein Conner makes his most sustained and serious attempt to grapple with the characteristically Cold War-era tensions and anxieties that had preoccupied his films since A MOVIE in 1958. To imagine these three films together as a coherent group is not an arbitrary gesture of art historical classification, justified by their consecutive production; indeed, consider that from 1963 through 1967, the period in which Conner was engaged in re-editing REPORT, he completed four “self-authored” films (VIVIAN, BREAKAWAY, LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS, THE WHITE ROSE), and began working in “expanded” formats (light shows, experimental television). Moreover, the five-year production phase he assigns to MX5 (1968-1973) coincides with the period in which he claimed to have stopped making films altogether. CROSSROADS was likewise the result of a prolonged period of logistical negotiations with the State Department over Conner’s use of archival footage. My insistence that these three films belong together relies, then, not so much on a chronological approach to Conner’s work as on their profound aesthetic, formal, and structural correspondence.

Due to their minute attention to the nuances of movement, gesture, and speed, this found footage trilogy, I argue, functions less like music videos and more like *motion studies*. This term is often used to denote a genre of photography exemplified by Étienne Jules-Marey’s *chronophotography* and Eadweard Muybridge’s *zoopraxography*, two key late 19th-century

precursors to modern motion picture technology.²⁴⁷ Whereas Muybridge and Marey used the camera to analyze movement through rapid-fire, serial photographic capture, Conner's motion studies are less concerned with recording and analyzing movement as serial progression than with disrupting its flow. Thus, instead of reproducing the illusion of movement, Conner uses repetition to stagger the progressive flow of cinematic time, dismantle continuous cinematic space, and dismember human anatomies into isolated gestures and forms. In short, he brushes the motion study genre against the grain to produce detailed analyses of rupture, crisis and decline.

In the motion studies I discuss in this chapter, time loops, stutters and stalls; bodies convulse; machines malfunction; records break; and memory is triggered, but ultimately, fails. Each of these three films demonstrates how repetition can be used to occlude rather than reveal meaning, by instigating a breakdown in the image's capacity to signify, thus rendering their familiar subject matter strangely incoherent. With their proliferation of overburdened and overdetermined signs, the trilogy films push signification itself to the brink of collapse, and provoke profoundly visceral perceptual experiences marked by a mix of unease, pathos, and desire. It is in this short-circuiting of signification through repetition that I locate the "motion" of Conner's "motion studies": rather than making an empirical record of objects' linear progression through space and time, in the manner of his 19th-century forbears, Conner's trilogy films trace the push-and-pull oscillation between the legible sign and flickering illegibility, between coherence and disorientation, image and pure affect, and thus chart the vertiginous journey of perception into the sphere of the sublime.

²⁴⁷ For more on Marey's experiments and the key distinctions between his and Muybridge's work, see Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Étienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)* (University of Chicago Press, 1994).

REPORT (1963-1967)

The title of *REPORT* carries multiple meanings. To start, it refers to the conventional format of a journalistic news report, a structure that Conner's film both mirrors and deconstructs. More specifically, it refers to the Warren Commission Report, an official governmental inquiry into the JFK assassination commissioned by Lyndon Johnson and released in fall 1964. The Warren Commission concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone gunman responsible for the President's death, and in turn, that Jack Ruby also acted alone in killing Oswald. The findings of Conner's "report" on the assassination are far more ambiguous, though not entirely inconclusive. Though Oswald and Ruby play supporting roles in the assassination plot, *REPORT* also implicates the entire American economic-political system, as well as the citizen-consumers who participate in it; in the words of Bruce Jenkins, the film "extends the critique of the commercialization of the Kennedy myth into a global unmasking of a commodification of the political process."²⁴⁸ And finally, the "report" refers to the loud bang of the gun shot that killed the President, a split-second explosion that echoed around the world, and resonates to this day, like the shockwave of an atomic blast.

At times suspenseful, brutal, and poignant, *REPORT* is a dense montage of found footage accompanied by radio coverage narrating that infamous day in Dallas, both before and after the shooting. The film begins with the familiar image of the Presidential motorcade immediately before the shooting, focusing on the President and First Lady as they wave to the assembled crowd. Conner loops the shot four times, gradually extending it with each repetition to allow the car to progress slightly further along its route (fig. 4.1). In one instance, he uses a mirror effect to make the shot run in reverse, in a seeming attempt at postponing the motorcade's progress

²⁴⁸ Jenkins, "Bruce Conner's Report: Contesting Camelot," 246.

towards its inevitable, lethal end. Here, REPORT functions as a motion study of a perpetually delayed action. Rather than charting the motorcade's locomotion, Conner arrests it, short-circuiting the image's narrative function and transforming it into an ominous premonition of the crisis about to unfold.

Suddenly, just as the radio announcer's panicked voice proclaims "It appears as if something has happened in the motorcade route," Conner cuts to sequence of black and white flicker, which continues for an additional three minutes. Irregular and hypnotic, the flicker forges an audiovisual correspondence between its disorienting strobe and the dwindling consciousness of the slain leader, while the radio announcer confirms Kennedy's death over the soundtrack. As this white beam intermittently flashes across the faces and bodies of the audience, REPORT implicates the audience in his death, an event that is communicated through a purely optical language of black and white frames.²⁴⁹ Having provided a fleeting (though looped) glimpse of Kennedy's motorcade, Conner abstracts his body into these two basic units of film projection, thus instantiating his physical dissolution on-screen. Recalling the "subliminal," rapid-fire editing patterns of COSMIC RAY, LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS and BREAKAWAY, REPORT's flicker produces a state of optical disorientation, disembodiment, and anticipation that is reminiscent of psychedelic experience, yet one completely pared down and aesthetically minimal. By imagining the death experience from within the safe confines of the theatre, REPORT thereby renders an unrepresentable, inconceivable phenomenon into something perceptible and conceivable, and thus ventures into the territory of the sublime.

After Kennedy's death is registered on the soundtrack and the flicker ceases, Conner introduces a range of news footage related to the assassination, including the famed image of

²⁴⁹ This interpretation of the flicker is also suggested by Peter Boswell, "Bruce Conner: Theater of Light and Shadow," in *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1999), 54.

Oswald's rifle being carried aloft, followed moments later by freeze frames of the Oswald's own assassination at the hands of Jack Ruby, which was notoriously captured on live television. Here Conner includes a looped sequence of Jackie Kennedy struggling to open the door to the ambulance carrying her deceased husband, which (as discussed in Chapter Two) was projected on a loop during the light show at the 1966 San Francisco Trips Festival. As with the motorcade footage and the flicker sequence, this looped repetition functions like a redundant motion study of delayed action. Suddenly, the montage shifts to a looping sequence of academy leader, including the familiar countdown and focus crosshairs. Often called "head leader," this section of the film compels a morbid association between the flickering countdown, and the "head" of the "leader," the mutual target of both the assassin and the news media coverage. Yet again, the film's "motion" is delayed and deconstructed, this time by the repetitive run of the countdown, which literalizes the rational flow of clock-time (10, 9, 8...) only to collapse and abstract it into a cyclical flow of numbers and symbols. The "head leader" also metaphorically invokes the dual function of the focus crosshairs in both film projection and long-range shooting, suggesting a correspondence between the sniper's perch in the Book Depository tower and the projectionist's booth, between the rifle's sight as a camera lens, both aiming their lethal gaze at the leader's head (fig. 4.2).

The segment of leader signals the end of the first section of *REPORT*, which totals about eight minutes. Significantly, this section features flicker effects and loop printing, two of the four main features that Sitney identified in his morphology of structural film in 1969. Indeed, throughout *REPORT* Conner pursues the kind of self-reflexive deconstruction of cinematic experience that is considered a hallmark of structural film. Emphasizing that *REPORT* debuted the same year as Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), David James argues that Conner's film

presents a “lucid synthesis of aesthetic and political progressivism [that] punctuates a phase in film history,” namely, the transition from the underground’s “beat aestheticism” to “a film practice that severed reflexivity from all social reference,” or, structural film.²⁵⁰ In this sense, REPORT straddles these two phases of the American avant-garde, between the poetic romanticism and social commentary of the Beat underground and the abstract self-reflexivity of structuralism. Because it mixes these styles and modes, REPORT represents a challenge to the categories set forth by Sitney and other taxonomies of avant-garde cinema informed by the critical discourse of high modernism.

Yet, insofar as REPORT (and, as we shall see, Conner’s trilogy as a whole) shares a common set of formal and conceptual qualities with structural film, it also confronts the same representational dilemmas faced by the early 20th century avant-garde. Here, I want to pause in my discussion of REPORT in order to elucidate how my reading of Conner’s trilogy as cinematic “motion studies” is indebted to art historian David Joselit’s discussion of Marcel Duchamp’s early painting practice in comparison to Pablo Picasso’s “synthetic” Cubist period. Joselit bases this comparison on Rosalind Krauss’s famous reading of Cubism through the lens of Saussurean structural linguistics, and writes:

if...Picasso was playing a zero-sum game in which the emergence of a semiotic economy of representation is inversely proportional to the visual experience of carnal plenitude, Duchamp’s *Network of Stoppages* suggests a different model. For this painting envisions a *process* in which the body attains the status of sign while retaining a potent residue of its carnality. Rather than focusing on the end points of the process—sign versus carnality—Duchamp positioned his work in the space *between*, where one is perpetually transforming and falling back into the other.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*, 158.

²⁵¹ David Joselit, *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp, 1910-1941* (MIT Press, 2001), 18.

Alongside *Network of Stoppages*, I would offer Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* of 1912 as a key work that similarly positions the carnal body and signification in irresolvable tension—a state of perpetual “between-ness” and semiotic “becoming.” Significantly, *Nude Descending* was inspired by Marey's *chronophotography*, and represents a painterly interpretation of the photographic motion study, one that is also informed by the superseding invention of moving picture technology.

In qualifying Conner's trilogy as “motion studies,” I am invoking this term in the Duchampian sense as outlined by Joselit above. In Conner's films, the representation of the body, carnal plenitude, and more generally, sensory experience, are closely aligned with this Duchampian process of “oscillation” between body and sign, rather than with the “zero-sum” logic that Joselit (pace Krauss) identifies with Picasso's synthetic Cubist collage. Though Conner uses repetition to render the image increasingly abstract, the bodies (defined broadly) in his films are never fully “semiotized,” to use another Joselit's terms—they remain in flux, in-process, and troublingly unassimilable to interpretation. In charting this vertiginous oscillation between body and sign, Conner's motion studies provoke a kind of cinematic motion sickness, one that characterizes the sublime's chiasmatic tension between beauty and terror, pleasure and disorientation. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the same year that he began working on *REPORT*, 1963, Conner met Marcel Duchamp at a lecture at The Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, and the two engaged in a brief, highly performative artistic exchange via their New York gallerist, Charles Alan.²⁵²

²⁵² The significance of this meeting is considered in Jenkins, “Bruce Conner's *Report*: Contesting Camelot,” 239–240, and in a brief excerpt from an interview with Elizabeth Armstrong, published as “Interviews with Ed Ruscha and Bruce Conner,” *October* 70, no. The Duchamp Effect (Autumn 1994): 55–59, and later re-published in Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon, *The Duchamp Effect* (MIT Press, 1996), 55–60.

The oscillating motion of the REPORT's "motion study" is largely confined to the first half of the film, which is largely concerned with re-producing the assassination and its aftermath in experiential terms. The film's second half, which Conner called the "epilogue," pursues the critique of capitalist consumption and media spectacle that REPORT is most remembered for. Bruce Jenkins, one of the most articulate commentators on REPORT, has described the epilogue section as "one of the most innovative and sustained experiments in Eisensteinian vertical montage—the systematic interweaving of sound and image—in the history of the medium."²⁵³ Likewise, one contemporary reviewer (of a version released in 1966) described the epilogue as a "a tour de force of implicational montage."²⁵⁴

REPORT's epilogue contains such a rich constellation of audiovisual references, metaphors, puns, and potential interpretations that it is impossible to fully register them all in a single viewing, or summarize them in a single text.²⁵⁵ The more noted sequences include travelogue footage of a matador spearing a bull before a stadium of onlookers, which is paired with a radio announcer describing preparations for the President's visit to Dallas—the setting of Kennedy's slaying before a crowd of shocked spectators. Later, advertisements for kitchen appliances and food products aimed at the average middle-class American housewife are paired with audio recordings of Air Force One's arrival at Love Field. REPORT's final shot is of female travel agent cheerfully pushing the "SELL" button on an IBM computer; a symbol of the sanitization of violence in a Cold War technocracy, this image drives home the notion that

²⁵³ Jenkins, "Bruce Conner's *Report*: Contesting Camelot," 243.

²⁵⁴ David Mosen, "Report by Bruce Conner," *Film Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Spring 1966): 55. A critical term that has fallen out of fashion, "implicational montage" is defined as "montage of the concepts derived from observing the sequences regarded as wholes, by way of a realization of the *implications* of these sequences." Raymond Spottiswoode, *A Grammar of the Film* (University of California Press, 1965), 51.

²⁵⁵ For instance, Martin Norden includes a "partial list of *Report*'s contrapuntal puns" that includes seventeen distinct observations. See Norden, "A Report on Bruce Conner's 'Report,'" 81-82.

Kennedy is a commodity and the assassination functioned as a commercial transaction between the mass media and the American consumer.

More recent writing on the film reflects a shift away from semiotic and iconographic analysis, towards an emphasis on the film's internal logic. Rather than attempting to "solve the riddle" by decoding its multilayered significations, scholars have recently theorized how REPORT reproduces the processes of private mourning and melancholia, or in another, more historically-inflected example, how it mobilizes new forms of collective viewing engendered by the rise of television as the dominant postwar communication medium.²⁵⁶ Such approaches insist upon the film's experiential character, focusing on its "effects" rather than attempting to master or decode its multivalent significations.

Instead of rehearsing these different approaches here, I wish to draw attention to its under-acknowledged religiosity, and specifically, frequent invocation of Christian iconography and thematic motifs. Considering its preoccupation with the spectacular death of the first Catholic President of the United States, the presence of Christian themes in REPORT should

²⁵⁶ For a psychoanalytically-inflected reading of REPORT as a form of cinematic mourning, see Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner*, 164-66. While Hatch's argument is somewhat persuasive at the level of art criticism, it largely detaches REPORT from a socio-historical context, positioning the film as a private act of mourning and "working-through" loss, and thus, as a metaphor for cinema itself (his central argument about Conner's films). Hatch's reading entails the premise that REPORT is primarily about personal loss, rather than about observing the operations of collective mourning under conditions of all-pervasive mediation. Hatch concludes: "The great achievement of REPORT is to be found, then, not in its social criticism but in the way it figures human memory in a desperate struggle to maintain its purchase on a traumatic event, even as it is forced to do so using only the insufficient materials at hand...While the film's two parts are distinct, they are not experienced as separate; rather, they fold into each other, collapsing the public into the private." (Hatch, 165) Besides this reductive premise, which presumes the total incompatibility of public and private registers of experience, and requires that one collapse into the other rather than exist side-by-side in dialectical tension, Hatch's reading insists on the political neutrality of memory, itself a dubious claim, while also reproducing the privatization and psychologization of a highly mediated, social and collective event, a process that, I believe, is precisely that which REPORT problematizes and critiques. Ultimately, Hatch's argument seeks to align REPORT with the "traumatic realism" of Warhol's Death and Disaster paintings, as theorized by Hal Foster. I discuss the key differences between Warhol's serialized paintings and Conner's films below, in my discussion of MARILYN TIMES FIVE. For a more convincing, politically incisive, and historically grounded analysis of REPORT, see Erica Levin, "REPORT: On the Death of Kennedy and the Birth of the Televisual Crowd," in "Social Media: The News in Artists' Film, Performance, and Experimental Television After 1960" (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2014).

come as no surprise. Some of this imagery is quite literal—such as newsreel footage of Kennedy meeting the Pope, or the crosshairs of the countdown leader marking a graphic reference to the Christian “cross” of the Christian crucifix. Other examples are more metaphorical in character, such as the scenes of bullfighting, which are typically interpreted as a comment on the news media’s coverage of the assassination as a spectator sport animated by bloodlust. Here, Conner suggests an equivalence between the gruesome inevitability of the bullfight and Kennedy’s doomed procession along the motorcade route. Yet, bullfighting also carries religious connotations, as a public blood sacrifice reminiscent of Christ’s persecution in the Passion, and the subsequent persecution of Christian in gladiatorial games and the torturous rites of martyrdom. By likening him to the sacrificial bull, Conner is also subtly commenting on Kennedy’s cult status as a Christ-like figure, the messianic idol of the Camelot mythology.

Conner expands on the Christian metaphor when he intercuts newsreel coverage of Kennedy’s funeral procession with scenes from the classic horror film *The Bride of Frankenstein* (Dir. James Whale, 1935). The scientist is shown amongst the equipment in his laboratory, attempting to harness the electricity of a lightning storm in order to revive his monstrous creation. Here, Conner introduces the possibility of a Christ-like resurrection for Kennedy, but in warped form. Like Frankenstein’s monster, Kennedy’s second life will also be artificially engineered, in his case, through the electric currents of the cathode ray tube. Thus, while the Frankenstein footage might initially seem like a symptom of Conner’s love of screwball humor (*Duck Soup*) and irreverent visual juxtaposition, it carries far more damning implications, by situating the viewer firmly within the sinister feedback loop that manufactures profane simulacra.

The ritualistic overtones and quasi-messianic aura attributed to Kennedy in *REPORT* become more coherent when situated within the context of the film’s production. At the time of

the assassination in November 1963, Conner was living Brookline, MA, JFK's birthplace, and resided a mere seven blocks from the Kennedy family home, a twist of fate that would strongly impact Conner's experience of the assassination, leading him to become "obsessed," a word he frequently used when discussing what prompted him to begin making REPORT after the assassination:

I decided then that I would dedicate myself to recording what had happened and what would happen in Brookline because he was going to be buried there and I would live there for the next two or three years to work on that film and make a pilgrimage to the grave every day with my camera and show what had happened. Well, then [when Kennedy was buried in Arlington Cemetery] they took him away from me. I then decided that since I'd gotten a Ford Foundation grant I could make a film with stock footage. When I started the big problem was that I had to show what had happened: the exploitation of the man's death. That's what I had to show. That's what I wanted to show and I had to show it because nobody else was. There was tons of other information coming through the media—but this exploitation was the most obvious thing to me.²⁵⁷

After screening the film at the Flaherty Film Seminar in 1968, Conner recalled how on Kennedy's first birthday after the assassination, he ventured to the Kennedy home to pay his respects, and was shocked and dismayed to find himself the only mourner in attendance. That experience, Conner noted, "impressed on me that I had some responsibility there. It appeared that I was the only person who would relate to President Kennedy in this way...it took 2 ½ years for me to acknowledge that he was dead."²⁵⁸ Beyond his remarkable sense of identification with and uniquely felt responsibility to Kennedy, Conner's narrative, however romantic and possibly apocryphal, includes another key point in his description of the film he hoped to make about the assassination: that repetition, even ritual, provided the film's structuring logic at its inception: "I would live there for the next two or three years to work on that film and make a pilgrimage to the grave every day with my camera and show what had happened." More than just a symptomatic

²⁵⁷ "Bruce Conner," 18.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

feature of redundant broadcasts and slow newsfeeds, the logic of repetition in REPORT incorporates both critique and commemoration.

In his remarks at the Flaherty and elsewhere, Conner often used the terms “sacrilegious” and “immoral” to describe both the mainstream media’s exploitation of Kennedy’s death and the negative audience reaction he encountered at screenings of REPORT.²⁵⁹ Conner sought to depict, rather than endorse, this sacrilege; however, he also understood that an accurate depiction required a parasitic relationship to television’s content and visual logic. REPORT’s dependency on mass media was made explicit when Conner initially sought access to assassination-related footage from national television networks like CBS and NBC, all of which refused his requests.²⁶⁰ The film footage and radio recordings that he ultimately used in REPORT were derived from various compilations that went on sale to the general public beginning starting in 1964, in response to the demand for Kennedy memorabilia.²⁶¹ Conner considered the proliferation of commemorative merchandise, which he characterized mockingly as “Jack Kennedy banks” and “gooey posters,” to be dehumanizing and sinister; however, he also required access to the products of this emerging industry in order to critique it.

Though he objected to the commercialization of Kennedy’s death, Conner understood that he would first have to master televisual discourse—its monotony, uncanniness, and crass commercialism—in order to deform it. Indeed, Conner regarded the close correlation between the mainstream media and REPORT’s intervention to be the central artistic problem of the film:

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Robert Haller, “Excerpts of an Interview with Bruce Conner Conducted in July of 1971,” *Film Culture* 67/68/69 (1979): 193.

²⁶¹ The Kennedy-related footage seen in REPORT was derived from compilation reels produced after the assassination, and the soundtrack was taken from an LP entitled *Four Days that Shook the World*, featuring excerpts from radio broadcasts on November 22-25, 1963, and released the following year.

“the big problem was that I had to show what had happened: *the exploitation of the man’s death*...in order for me to do the film I would also have to go through the same processes that those people were using to exploit Kennedy.” REPORT thus reflects a social reality where public mourning is privately performed, in which collectivity is literally *channeled* through the simultaneous reception of the television report, broadcast repeatedly and viewed continuously. Conner’s “sacrilege” was exposing television’s hypocritical sanctimony and laying bare the capitalist logic behind the Kennedy myth.

Moving beyond a straightforward political indictment of media spectacle, REPORT theorizes the role of mass communication, and particularly of television, in programming historical memory, political consensus, and social reality. Yet, rather than outright condemnation, REPORT is more concerned with unpacking television’s social logic when confronted with a traumatic, violent loss, in order to illuminate the media’s role in reproducing the modern American consumer-citizen. This becomes especially clear in a companion piece to REPORT that Conner called TELEVISION ASSASSINATION, a brief montage of television broadcasts that Conner filmed directly off of the television screen in the months following the assassination of JFK. Here, the central televisual spectacle is not Kennedy’s assassination, but rather, Oswald’s, whose shooting by Jack Ruby was recorded live and at close range by dozens of news cameras, in stark contrast to the ambiguous circumstances of Kennedy’s final moments.

Like REPORT, TELEVISION ASSASSINATION includes iconic moments from Kennedy’s presidency, the assassination, and its aftermath: shots of the Dallas motorcade, of Oswald in custody and his murder by Jack Ruby, the exterior of the Texas School Book Depository, the Kennedy funeral procession and Arlington National Cemetery, Kennedy’s Inaugural Parade, and the printed titles of the “Official Warren Commission Report,” along with

archetypal television commercials of the period, including for a Thanksgiving turkey and Salem cigarettes, and quick close-ups of Paul McCartney and John Lennon. Particularly striking are close-ups of the Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro and Soviet premier Nikita Krushchev, key adversaries of the U.S. during the Cuban Missile Crisis, a defining event in the Kennedy presidency and the Cold War. These shots are followed by aerial views of the iconic mushroom cloud, a central image in the media complex of Cold War ideology. Re-photographed directly off the television monitor screen, this stream of images appears truncated by bars of vertical roll, and is further obscured by multiple exposures (executed in-camera on Conner's Bolex) that compress and collapse the televisual narrative into a palimpsest of signifiers (fig. 4.3).

In 1975, Conner exhibited an 8mm, silent, three-minute version of TELEVISION ASSASSINATION spliced head-to-tail for Technicolor loop projection, similar to the 1965 version of LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS. The following year, he designed an installation version to accompany the premiere of CROSSROADS at the San Francisco Museum of Art: seven prints were spliced together on one reel and projected at five framers per second on the glass screen of a television set dating from the early 1960s. In 1995, Conner step-printed the footage to stretch its duration to fourteen minutes, just as he had with the updated Terry Riley version of LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS from that same year. Conner asked composer Patrick Gleeson (CROSSROADS, TAKE THE 5:10 TO DREAMLAND) to create a new soundtrack of ambient, synthesizer-driven sounds to accompany the film, which invests the slowed-down material with haunting resonances. Through its multiple versions and looped formats, the form of TELEVISION ASSASSINATION inhabits the same logic of repetition that organizes its televisual content. Nevertheless, it remains a vastly less complex and affecting work than REPORT, which invests its critique with visceral identification and moral outrage.

Insofar as REPORT and TELEVISION ASSASSINATION are both *about* television, I would argue that the former remains a steadfastly *cinematic* work, experientially and formally, and that the viewer it addresses is the film spectator, not the television consumer. As remarked at the opening of this chapter, REPORT was completed in 1967, the year that marked the birth of “video art,” an artistic form with an inherent genetic relationship to television, the dominant medium of postwar American consumer society. Yet, equally importantly, REPORT was produced at the moment when newsreel production was in decline, as most Americans consumed their news not from the weekly digest screened in a movie theatre, but from an anchor on network news.²⁶² It is at this historical crux between old and new media that REPORT is situated—at the intersection of past and future, obsolete formats and networked horizons. Thus, to re-affirm that REPORT as a work of experimental cinema is to distinguish it from a work of video art, a medium that, as many early observers noted, absorbed and critiqued the logic of its ancestral medium, television.²⁶³

This distinction is clarified by a comparison between REPORT and two classic works of video art which, like REPORT, uncannily re-enact the Kennedy assassination to construct a critique of televisual spectatorship: Ant Farm’s *Media Burn* and, with T.R. Uthco, *The Eternal Frame* (both 1975). On July 4th, 1975, members of the Bay Area art collective Ant Farm (at the time consisting of Chip Lord, Doug Michels, Curtis Schreier, with others joining at various points) gathered in the parking lot of San Francisco’s Cow Palace to execute *Media Burn*, a

²⁶² Numerous newsreel companies halted production in the late 1960s, such as Universal Newsreel, which ended in 1967. In her work on REPORT, Erica Levin contextualizes Conner’s film against the declining medium of the newsreel and the simultaneous rise of the television news anchorman. See Levin, “REPORT: On the Death of Kennedy and the Birth of the Televisual Crowd.”

²⁶³ An early and particularly lucid analysis of the relationship between video art and television is offered in David Antin, “Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium,” in *Video Art*, ed. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), reprinted in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John G. Hanhardt (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986), 147–166.

hybrid conceptual press conference and performance art happening. The event was widely attended by multiple television affiliates and widely covered on the local news as a peculiar kind of Fourth of July celebration. Following the tradition of politicians addressing the public on Independence Day, the event opened with a speech by artist Doug Hall performing a practiced impersonation of President Kennedy, complete with faux bodyguards. But, instead of the patriotic spectacle of a firework display, *Media Burn* culminated with the explosive collision of two archetypal American commodities—the television and the automobile (fig. 4.4).²⁶⁴

After the presidential address, Ant Farmers Michels and Schreier emerged, outfitted in futuristic gear reminiscent of both astronauts and crash test dummies. The “artist-dummies,” as they called themselves, boarded a 1959 Cadillac El Dorado Biarritz convertible modified to resemble a retro-futurist space ship, which they called the “Phantom Dream Car.” With its windshield and windows mostly covered over, the drivers navigated using a system of cameras and monitors installed within the vehicle —an updating of the early cinematic genre of the “phantom ride” for the age of closed-circuit video. At the end of the countdown, Michels and Schrier drove the Phantom Dream Car into a wall of television monitors stacked twenty feet high, pyramid-like, at the end of a long runway, resulting in an explosive crash. Combining the iconography of the space race with that of Kennedy’s final ride in the Dallas motorcade, the Phantom Dream Car’s heavily mediated “phantom ride” into the future culminated in a fiery “media burn,” one that, in turn, would live on as a media memory.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁴ Karen Beckman offers an analysis of cinematic representations of the automobile disasters, including REPORT and Ant Farm’s work, in *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis* (Duke University Press, 2010).

²⁶⁵ For more on the history and work of Ant Farm, see the exhibition catalogue that accompanied a 2004 retrospective at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Constance M. Lewallen and Steve Seid, *Ant Farm, 1968-1978* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

Just months after producing *Media Burn*, Ant Farm collaborated with the artists' collective T.R. Uthco (Doug Hall, Diane Andrews Hall, Jody Procter) on *The Eternal Frame*, a live video re-enactment of the Kennedy assassination as seen in the infamous Zapruder film (fig. 4.5). With Hall reprising his role as President Kennedy and Michels in drag as Jacqueline Kennedy, the troupe descended on Dallas's Dealey Plaza to re-enact the assassination footage shot-by-shot, to the shock and fascination of onlookers. The resulting video combines the original Zapruder footage, the live re-enactment, mock "backstage" coverage of the actors, and bystander interviews. It was screened in San Francisco on the anniversary of the assassination, November 22nd 1975, and later exhibited on a television monitor within an installation designed to look like the typical American living room—much like the installation scenario Conner would later devise for TELEVISION ASSASSINATION.

In contrast to the ludic spectacle of the flaming television pyramid in *Media Burn*, *The Eternal Frame* is more cynically perverse, rendering the "eternal flame" of commemoration into an endlessly repeated televised broadcast. Using public re-enactment and repetition to rupture the Kennedy myth and dispute the sanctity of his death, Ant Farm/T.R. Uthco execute "critical sacrilege," in the tradition of REPORT. Even so, the powerful affective charge of Conner's work sharply distinguishes it from these video descendents. For Ant Farm, little trace of the "tragedy" remains: the assassination was *always already* farce, and will live on as pure simulacra. As Patricia Mellencamp (among others) has pointed out, the ethics of Ant Farm's critique is thoroughly postmodern, reflecting an ambivalent stance towards mass culture and a skeptical, even cynical attitude towards the (romantic) notion of a unique, authentic, *a priori* human

subjectivity.²⁶⁶ To this end, Mellencamp quotes Doug Hall's ersatz Kennedy at the beginning of

The Eternal Frame:

I am in reality nothing more than another image on your television set...I am in reality nothing more than another face on your screen, I am in reality only another link in that chain of pictures which makes up the sum total of information accessible to us all as Americans...Like my predecessors, the content of the image is no different from the image itself.²⁶⁷

The distinction between Conner's and Ant Farm's works becomes especially explicit when one compares REPORT's depiction of Kennedy's death as an extended sequence of stark, black-and-white flicker, to the caricatured impersonations of Hall as the President and Michels (in drag) as the First Lady. By reproducing Kennedy's death experientially rather than representationally, REPORT compels a corporeal and psychological identification with Kennedy, imbuing the event with pathos and anxiety. Thus, even though REPORT simulates the commercial logic of (televisual) mass media, Conner's affinity with Kennedy translates formally as a kind of reverent iconoclasm that registers as absence and loss. In place of Conner's reverence, Ant Farm/T.R. Uthco substitutes irreverence; to absence and loss, they respond with proxy and simulation. While utilizing many of the same critical strategies developed in REPORT, namely repetition and re-enactment, the works of Ant Farm/T.R. Uthco are deliberately drained of the pathos in favor of the blank, affectless pastiche that typifies the postmodern.

In his next film, MARILYN TIMES FIVE (MX5), Conner takes a similar approach to the clichéd surplus of media spectacle as he did in REPORT. Like REPORT, MX5 considers the demise of another postwar American icon—Marilyn Monroe—by implicating the viewer as a

²⁶⁶ Mellencamp notes, "Ant Farm did not need Baudrillard to tell it that TV confused the real with the imaginary. Although explicitly stated as a position of opposition to technocratic society and mess-mediated culture, its stance towards mass or popular culture, like its response to technology, was ambivalent or postmodern: Ant Farm used it while condemning it." Patricia Mellencamp, "Video Politics," in *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video, and Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1990), 54.

²⁶⁷ Mellencamp, 55.

complicit actor in her exploitation and death. Likewise, *MX5* indicates the affinity Conner that felt for his subject—though this time, this identification is with a woman, opening up the potential of a feminist reading. Moreover, a close analysis of *MX5* will further clarify how Conner's films reflect a romantic conception of human subjectivity, in opposition to the postmodernist critique of subjectivity as a system of effects rather than a unique, coherent entity.

MARILYN TIMES FIVE (1968-1973)

Whereas *REPORT* appropriated the conventions of the television report, *MX5* adapts the formulaic visual rhetoric of pornography to craft a haunting, melancholic reflection on celebrity, death, and cinema. The final cut of *MX5* is a thirteen-minute montage of found footage derived from an obscure, black-and-white pornographic film, sometimes billed as “The Apple, the Knockers and the Coke,” which features a solo female performer who bears an uncanny resemblance to a young Marilyn Monroe. Conner isolated brief segments of this grainy footage to create five repetitive movements of about two and a half minutes each, timed to match a recording of Monroe singing “I’m Through with Love,” from her 1959 film *Some Like it Hot* (dir. Billy Wilder).

Though *MX5* uses readymade film material, Conner's aesthetic interventions into the original footage were aggressive. First, he upped the contrast to transform the appearance of the fading grey film stock into a stark interplay of the female subject's white skin against black shadows. Then, he subjected the footage to disruptive cuts, slicing up the woman's movements and interspersing frames with large sections of black leader to render her performance staggered, discontinuous, and quasi-mechanical. With fetishistic attention to each gesture and expression, Conner's editing manipulates the performer's body like a marionette, forcing her to rehearse a

limited repertoire of achingly deliberate movements: a languorous striptease, rolling an apple between her bare breasts, and sipping from a Coke bottle, all while smiling drowsily into the camera (fig. 4.6). Paradoxically, the extended close-ups on her naked body gradually foreclose the possibility of visual pleasure and carnal plenitude: in essence, the more we see her, the more exhausted and diminished she appears—its as if she is being “worked to death.” In the words of one contemporary reviewer, “Watching Marilyn hulk endlessly through these banal motions is like watching every poor naked individual who has ever been used to purvey graceless and profiteering sex.”²⁶⁸ By referencing a universal condition, of “every poor naked individual,” Conner’s fraught portrait of “Marilyn” is brimming with pathos, empathy, and identification, regardless of whether she is who she appears to be. Dubbed, looped, distended and re-enacted, her performance appears increasingly abject, awkward, possibly even coerced, and by the song’s fifth and final iteration, *MX5* is indeed “through with love,” thoroughly drained of eroticism or visual pleasure.

Like *REPORT*, *MX5* also invokes and subverts the genre of the photographic motion study. But instead of the historical avant-garde legacy outlined above in my discussion of *REPORT*, here I want to emphasize how *MX5* activates, and in fact, fuses, two other representational traditions that develop from the motion study: pornographic film and scientific management. In her influential study of hardcore porn, Linda Williams (adapting terminology from the French film theorist Jean-Louis Comolli and philosopher Michel Foucault) positions Muybridge’s “motion studies” of nude female bodies acting out curious erotic scenarios like going to sleep, smoking, or pouring water on their nude bodies, as precursors to the modern

²⁶⁸ Michael Shedlin, “Marilyn,” *Film Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (Spring 1974): 47.

pornographic film.²⁶⁹ Williams characterizes these motion studies (after Comolli) as “machines of the visible,” which “offered a new kind of visual pleasure based in the photographic illusion of reality, a brand new ‘implantation of perversions,’” (qua Foucault). As such, Muybridge’s motion studies merged the scientific-epistemological drive to *analyze* and to *know* with the erotic desire for the female body, and in this sense, supplied “a condition of possibility for cinematic hard core.”²⁷⁰

In *MX5*, Conner summons pornographic cinema’s ancestral origin in photographic motion studies by isolating the unruly, awkward gestures of the eroticized female body and subjecting them to disruptive editing patterns and repetition. In doing so, though, Conner also marks this body as performing *labor*, and thus invokes another category of motion studies designed to promote industrial efficiency, an outgrowth of scientific management discourses that is often referred to by the shorthand term, “Taylorism.” Throughout *MX5*, Conner implies a visual analogy between the repetitive, serialized movements of the female performer and the mechanization of labor in modern industrial production, in a manner that recalls Walter Benjamin’s oft-quoted observation: “That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in the film.”²⁷¹ With each repetitive “movement” of *MX5*’s quintet, her gestures appear increasingly automated, as if literalizing both the “conveyor-belt” logic of the celluloid strip and the standardized formula of the pornographic genre. In posing an analogy between her rote movements and the assembly-line style of industrial production, Conner furthermore aligns his own work as a filmmaker—working

²⁶⁹ Linda Williams, “Prehistory: The Frenzy of the Visible,” in *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 44.

²⁷⁰ Williams, 48.

²⁷¹ Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 175.

meticulously at the editing table, cutting and splicing, frame-by-frame—with the mechanized sexual labor performed on-screen.

The laborious nature of this performance is amplified by the ambiguous identity of the performer (is she or isn't she?), a riddle that Conner refuses to solve. Instead, he added to the mystery by attaching Marilyn Monroe's identity to the film's title and soundtrack, and with enigmatic comments such as, "while it may or may not have been Marilyn Monroe in the original footage, it's her now. Part of what that film is about is the roles people play, and I think it fits either way. It's her image and her persona."²⁷² Yet, contemporary viewers who knew Monroe personally, including director Nicholas Ray and Monroe biographer Norman Mailer, challenged the authenticity of Conner's Marilyn, pointing out key anatomical differences, especially the size of her breasts.²⁷³ The woman seen in *MX5* was by all accounts not a young Norma Jeane Baker (Monroe's pre-Hollywood given name), but rather, a young pin-up model named Arline Hunter, whose only other claim to fame was as the August 1954 Playmate of the Month in *Playboy*—just nine months after the first issue was launched using the famous calendar pictorial of a young Monroe. In all likelihood, "The Apples, the Knockers, and the Coke" was produced in the late 1940s, in the years before Monroe achieved Hollywood fame, and thus, Hunter's uncanny similarity to Monroe is, at most, a proleptic coincidence. However, this coincidence is not just an arbitrary one—it is symptomatic of the formulaic conventions of the pornography genre; in other words, Hunter looks like "Marilyn" precisely because Marilyn

²⁷² Conner, quoted in Scott MacDonald, "Bruce Conner," in *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with American Independent Filmmakers*, vol. V (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 253.

²⁷³ Incidentally, Mailer considered Conner to be among his foremost creative influences, especially when the author turned to directing films. A 1971 *Time Magazine* profile on Mailer's film *Maidstone* states, "Norman Mailer admits that he is not the first to have made such an assault on tradition. Although the names of Buñuel, Dreyer and Antonioni are evoked in *Maidstone*, Mailer believes that his strongest single influence was the San Francisco film maker Bruce Conner, whose dazzling short works (*A Movie*, *Cosmic Ray*, and *Report*) constantly explore and test the limits of illusion." See Jay Cocks, "Cinema: Norman's Phantasmagoria," *Time Magazine*, November 15, 1971.

Monroe had successfully fashioned herself to conform to a specific archetype of erotic femininity at midcentury.

In keeping with these “mixed signals” at the level of the image, Conner’s choice of soundtrack is also intentionally misleading. By assigning an authentic vocal index to an unknown surrogate, MX5 essentially compels Hunter, no one in particular, to ventriloquize Monroe, the beloved and idolized star. Monroe originally performed “I’m Through with Love” in *Some Like it Hot*, a romantic comedy about cross-gender impersonation and mistaken identity. After inadvertently witnessing the St. Valentine’s Day massacre, two jazz musicians (played by Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis) decide to dress in drag to hide from gangsters. Comic hijinks ensue when these two unconvincing transvestites manage to pass as female for the majority of the film. Monroe’s song communicates the classic feminine vulnerability of her character, a naïve showgirl named “Sugar Kane,” who is easily duped by Lemmon and Curtis’s grotesque feminine caricatures. With this choice of soundtrack, Conner links Hunter’s striptease to the comedic drag performances of *Some Like it Hot*, while also suggesting that Hunter herself might represent a nonfictional version of Monroe’s Sugar Kane character.

Furthermore, by coupling footage of a coincidental simulacrum of Monroe with her authentic singing voice, Conner orchestrates a tense stand-off between the index of the photographic image and the index of the audio recording. This traps his faux “Marilyn” between the decaying celluloid index of an unknown imitator in the late 1940s, and the vocal index of Monroe’s peak stardom in 1959. MX5 is further animated by audience’s projected desire for a pre-Hollywood, “authentic” self to be recovered via Hunter’s surrogate performance. Ultimately, the film arrives at the sad truth that the persona assumed by Marilyn Monroe was as ubiquitous and exploitable as this anonymous woman. As witness to this depressing spectacle, the viewer is

directly implicated in Monroe's (and Hunter's) exploitation and suffering, and becomes increasingly aware of the utter falseness of the intimacy offered by the pornographic reel.

By the film's end, Hunter's labored performance has devolved into a hypnotic and disturbing ritual, a dance of death that leaves her lying on the ground, in a pose that anticipates the *mise-en-scène* of Monroe's own tragic death (fig. 4.7). These final close-up shots of her naked, supine body have a morbid, crime-scene quality that is enhanced by the decaying film stock, which lends her skin a mottled, lifeless appearance. This formal distress on the surface of the celluloid suggests a correspondence with the psychological and physical distress experienced by the woman on screen. In the words of Laura U. Marks, decaying works of film and video accumulate a unique kind of aura, eliciting a melancholic gaze that she calls "a look of love and loss."²⁷⁴ In *MX5*, the melancholic affection for this degraded Marilyn copy is linked to mourning for a lost cinematic object, and in this regard, it is important to note that Conner began work on *MX5* the year after the Sony PortaPak video camera was first released onto the market in 1967, the official birth date of video art.

Of course, Conner's appropriation and serialization of Monroe's image instantly recalls the more well-known silkscreen series by Andy Warhol, beginning with 1962's *Marilyn Diptych*. Produced in the immediate wake of Monroe's death, Warhol serialized her image into fifty distinctive portraits and then lined them up in a dual-composition grid formation, one side in color, the other in black and white. Though Warhol borrowed the diptych format from the Christian altarpiece tradition, the gridded layout also recalls a medium more closely identified with Monroe—that of the celluloid film strip. Warhol's silkscreen process corrodes the once-flawless surface of Monroe's photographed image, resulting in glaring distortions and

²⁷⁴ Laura U. Marks, "Loving a Disappearing Image," in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 91–110.

inconsistencies—smears, blurs, over-and under-saturation of the ink—that metaphorically index the fragility and artificiality of her glamorous persona. In light of her very recent death, these cracks in her usually seamless façade take on a haunting, spectral quality— especially evident in the last vertical strip on the far right of the frame, where Monroe seems to be fading into invisibility.

Beginning in 1979 and continuing until the year before he died in 1987, Warhol returned to the iconic portrait of Monroe in his *Reversals Series*, which solarizes the image to render her famously alabaster complexion in photographic negative (fig. 4.8-4.9). Here, Warhol substitutes the colorful “makeup” seen in his earlier Marilyn silkscreens with a kind of neon blackface, suggesting a critique of femininity as not simply masquerade, but as a form of erotic minstrelsy. Like *Marilyn Diptych*, the *Reversals Series* also suggests an affinity with religious imagery. In the latter work, the solarization effect recalls the spectral, proto-photographic quality of a certain class of holy relics which allegedly bear the image-traces of Christ’s body, such as the Shroud of Turin, which the devoutly Catholic Warhol would have certainly been familiar with.²⁷⁵ Relics like the Shroud are regarded by the Church as *acheiropoieta*, or “icons made without hands,” a category of “unpainted,” divinely-transmitted images. As images made without manual intervention, *acheiropoieta* parallel the deskilled, automated aesthetic that Warhol achieved through his reliance on mechanical reproduced imagery, his “Factory” of artistic production, and an industrial ethos exemplified by his oft-cited motto, “I want to be a machine.”²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ The Shroud was back in the public limelight in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1978, it was publicly exhibited in Turin to celebrate its 400th anniversary of its discovery. That same year, a group of American scientists started the *Shroud of Turin Research Project*, which ran a series of tests to determine the Shroud’s authenticity. The results were released in 1981 and were inconclusive. “Shroud of Turin Research Project,” *Wikipedia*, August 29, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Shroud_of_Turin_Research_Project&oldid=564504785.

²⁷⁶ For more on *acheiropoeita* and the historical function of “unpainted” devotional images in late antique and medieval Christendom, see Hans Belting, “Heavenly Images and Earthly Portraits: St. Luke’s Picture and

Just as Warhol's "reversed" Marilyns invoke the proto-photographic phenomena of the holy shroud, so too does the decaying found footage of *MX5* similarly index the "deadness" of its subject. Both of these works recall André Bazin's essay "On the Ontology of the Photographic Image," in which the French film theorist famously describes photography as a practice of "embalming time," and film as "change mummified." Bazin compares the function of photography and cinema to relics and saints' cults, noting that the Holy Shroud of Turin "combines the features alike of relic and photograph," a description that equally befits Warhol's diptychs and shroud-like imagery, as well as the weathered traces of an unknown "martyr" in *MX5*.²⁷⁷ But, whereas Warhol's work presents a subtle critique of Hollywood stardom as a saints' cult, Conner's film performs a reverse function, by canonizing a forgotten saint who was lost to history.

I introduce Bazin here not to open up a discussion on cinematic realism, but rather, to reprise the discussion of the role of ritual and Christological iconography initiated in my reading of *REPORT*. In *MX5*, Conner once again positions his tragic subject as a sacrificial figure. Likewise, just as he used the term "sacrilegious" to describe the mass media's exploitation of Kennedy's death, Conner used religious language when discussing his attitude towards female eroticism and objectification. For instance, when asked about the role of images of women in his work, Conner responded:

Well, I'm always dealing with theater of one sort or another and with characters. I felt that everybody was involved in play-acting forms that really weren't them, or they were under the control of forces, imposing themselves on them. I think it's true that a lot of it has to do with my view of women. [...] I felt they were like an erotic heroine (which

'Unpainted' Originals in Rome and the Eastern Empire," in *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 47–77.

²⁷⁷ André Bazin, "Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema? Volume One*, ed. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 14.

might be Jean Harlow or Mae West or somebody else) somebody who took on the activity as Christ would take on the Cross. It was obviously the tool they had to work with and they were not bad people.²⁷⁸

Here, Conner names two exemplary Hollywood blonde bombshells of the 1930s, Jean Harlow (who inspired the term) and Mae West. Both actresses were frequently cast as *femme fatales*, as dangerous, independent women who wielded their sexuality as a weapon but also suffered under its burden, as both a source of power and the eventual cause of their demise. We could easily add Marilyn Monroe and Arline Hunter to this list of heroines who suffered erotic martyrdom, just “as Christ would take on the Cross.” Significantly, Conner describes female sexuality as the “tool they had to work with,” and, especially in the case of Hunter, it is this *work*, this labor, which *MX5* exposes and invites us to empathize with.

Though Warhol and Conner’s shared investment in Christian allegory is a key point of intersection, generally speaking, these two artists represent sharply divergent approaches to mass culture in postwar American art, for many of the same reasons I described in my comparison of *REPORT* with Ant Farm’s postmodernist pastiche. Nevertheless, Warhol and Conner are frequently grouped together, mainly for the purposes of constructing historical lineages for the development of postwar American art. For instance, in a seminal essay from 1982, art historian and critic Benjamin H.D. Buchloh positions Conner and Warhol as the dual progenitors of the “allegorical procedures” deployed by postmodern appropriation art, and specifically, the work of feminist video artist, Dara Birnbaum.²⁷⁹ Here, I will discuss a key example of Birnbaum’s

²⁷⁸ Karlstrom, Oral History Interview with Bruce Conner.

²⁷⁹ Buchloh writes: “The formal procedures of fragmentation and serial repetition to which Birnbaum subjects the appropriated television material expand Warhol’s pictorial strategy of serializing commodity imagery, and his and Bruce Conner’s device of using film loops and serialized segments. They break the temporal continuity of the television narrative and split it into self-reflexive elements that make the minute and seemingly inextricable interaction of behavior and ideology an observable pattern. As a result of the precision with which Birnbaum employs these allegorical procedures we discover with unprecedented clarity to what degree the theater of professional facial expressions, performed by actors in close-ups on the television screen, has become the new

postmodern video practice in order to clarify precisely how Conner's work is distinct from its postmodern descendents.

For Buchloh, the work by Birnbaum that exemplifies postmodern "allegorical procedures" is *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978-79), a 5-minute, 50-second, single-channel color video compiled of footage derived from the campy late 1970s TV show *Wonder Woman* (fig. 4.10). Birnbaum extracted and then looped scenes in which the everyday secretary Diana Prince undergoes an explosive "transformation" to become the buxom superheroine outfitted in her trademark patriotic leotard. With a fiery burst of libidinal energy, actress Lynda Carter is shown in a perpetual state of becoming "Wonder Woman," spinning and stripping to produce her spectacular metamorphosis. This climactic explosion signals the release of erotic tension and the fulfillment of the desire for total visibility—replicating the visual and narrative function of the conventional pornographic climax, known as the "money shot."

Through this monotonous repetition of trite media images, Birnbaum exposes the *cuts*, literal and allegorical, embedded within the televisual transformation. Just as Wonder Woman strips away her conventional femininity to reveal herself as a superhuman sex symbol, emitting an explosive surplus of visual and erotic pleasure in her wake, Birnbaum strips away this excess of pleasure, unmasking the image's ideological function and commodity status. Describing the work, Birnbaum has stated, "Tony Conrad once said I was actually cutting television commercials for the hidden messages of TV and therefore showing the exact exchange of the currency of TV for the currency of art."²⁸⁰ By allegorizing Wonder Woman's transformative

historical site of the domination of human behavior by ideology." Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* 21, no. 1 (September 1982): 55.

²⁸⁰ Dara Birnbaum, *Rough Edits: Popular Image Video Works 1977-1980*, ed. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Nova Scotia Pamphlets (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1987), 84.

“circulation” as a critique of the image’s circulation as a commodity, Birnbaum’s aim is clearly critical negation and deconstruction, not recuperation of this clichéd representation.

During the final minutes of the video, images of Wonder Woman are replaced with scrolling white text against a blue background, printed captions for the lyrics of the song “Wonder Woman Disco.” Birnbaum notes that the song was produced seemingly “overnight” to capitalize on the success of the TV show, and even though the female vocalist was not even credited on the record, she notes, “it hardly matters. It’s a fabricated voice and the message is fabricated as well.”²⁸¹ Whereas Conner utilizes the singing voice as a signifier for the real body of Monroe and a source of pathos, for Birnbaum, the voice is just another anonymous component in the continuous stream of fabrications that constitutes spectacle.

Overall, MX5 is more committed to the existence of a “real” behind the image, whereas in Birnbaum’s video, authenticity is irrelevant. However, both works pursue a feminist critique of gender roles as performative and ideological, through their linking of iconic representations of feminine erotic spectacle to instances of mistaken identity and masquerade. In Conner’s work, this ambiguity is communicated by the on-screen image (is it really her?) as well as the soundtrack’s association with drag performance (*Some Like It Hot*). Clearly, *Technology/Transformation* also trafficks in alter-egos, with Diana Prince exposed as Wonder Woman *ad infinitum*. Yet, Birnbaum also used site-specific installation to comment on gender as a performative act. Historically, the video has been shown on CRT monitors in the gallery setting, as well as in theatrical presentations in avant-garde film festivals. But she has also exhibited it in unconventional public spaces like dance clubs and hair salons, sites that, like television,

²⁸¹ Birnbaum, 85.

constitute zones of consumption and entertainment, and, like the Wonder Woman series, are structured around the logic of “erotic transformation,” gender performance, and masquerade.

In this sense, Birnbaum’s work is situated at what Craig Owens identifies in his influential 1983 essay on “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” as the “crossing of the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodernist critique of representation” that characterized cutting-edge feminist art practice of the late 1970s.²⁸² Yet, whereas *Technology/Transformation* fits neatly into the dominant genealogy of postmodern feminist art, Conner’s work in general has been criticized for reproducing rather than critiquing the patriarchal gaze.²⁸³ Dance historian Sally Banes’s description of Conner’s work exemplifies this mode of feminist critique:

The bebies of pinup girls in Bruce Conner’s films and collages are like catalogs of the culture’s displays of gender differentiation; moreover, they are erotically implicated in anxieties of nuclear destruction (as in *A Movie* and *Cosmic Ray*), political disaster (*Report*), and psychosexual fetishism. In these works, as in Lichtenstein’s portraits of comic-book women, the imagery is stylized, exaggerated, repetitive—to our eyes, outlandish. And yet nothing else in the works contravenes the standard social meaning of ‘the female.’ These are typical emblems of female helplessness, wiliness, and sexiness, only made more gigantic. Reproducing iconography of mainstream culture, these transferences of female images leave gender codes intact.

Indeed, the premise of a work like *MX5* is that the viewer will be captivated by the “to-be-looked-at-ness” of the female body, to once again invoke Mulvey’s incisive phrase. Yet, to examine Conner’s film alongside and in light of Birnbaum’s work, and specifically, to compare how repetition functions in both works, helps to clarify why a critique of *MX5* as anti-feminist risks obscuring the film’s complex intermingling of desire and identification, and its insistence

²⁸² Craig Owens, “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (University of California Press, 1994), 168-169. Owens is particularly critical of the fact that Buchloh’s reading of postmodern appropriation art’s “allegorical procedures” is remarkably resistant to acknowledging the explicitly feminist content of much of this work.

²⁸³ Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 228.

on sexuality and femininity forms of labor, and, in Conner's quasi-religious understanding, a form of social and erotic martyrdom.

Technology/Transformation deploys repetition to numb desire and short-circuit identification, rendering Wonder Woman's transformation redundant and ridiculous, her erotic and economic power demystified and debunked. In contrast, Conner uses repetition to accumulate aura to the decaying image, and compel a visceral, empathic response to her mechanistic, life-draining labor.²⁸⁴ If there is a feminist critique of representation to be found in *MX5*, then, it is less the intended goal than a by-product of Conner's elegiac treatment of an abject female body as an allegorical symbol of universal female (and by extension, human) suffering. My point here is not to measure the success of Conner's feminist critique against Birnbaum's work, but rather, to understand how in spite of nearly identical formal strategies and similar content, Conner's work is essentially invested in recovering a poetics from the decaying image, a possibility that Birnbaum all but forecloses through her feminist intervention into the politics of representation.

This comparison also highlights a striking generational shift in how postwar American artists conceived of subjectivity and identity. If we understand the potential feminist critique generated by *MX5* as part of its broader humanistic critique of exploitation, one firmly anchored in romantic notions of human subjectivity, a poetic "self" that must be defended against the incursions of capitalism and mass culture, then, put simply, Conner is an unrepentant modernist. Birnbaum, however, is interested in un-covering the specific operations of patriarchal

²⁸⁴ My reading of *MX5* is in agreement with Paul Arthur's: "With its ostensibly voyeuristic address and mechanical control of the female body, *Marilyn* could be interpreted as a sadistic affirmation of the power of male desire through the coerced submissiveness of a tortured cultural icon. Such a view, however, misses the film's darker meanings and self-implicating pathos...The feeling is that of being trapped inside a desiring machine gone haywire." Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 43-44.

representation, not in re-covering a lost “self,” whether Lynda Carter’s, or her own, as an artist. The moniker of “appropriation art” tends to elide these critical historical and conceptual distinctions, collapsing everything into a (post-)Warholian paradigm that is itself still being challenged and re-worked. Considering that mass media appropriation has emerged as the hegemonic mode of mainstream contemporary art, the task of identifying differences amongst the appearance of sameness remains critically important.

Thus far, my reading of MX5—and Conner’s found footage practice in general—has been informed by an existing body of work on avant-garde film that argues that found footage acquires an “ambiguous aura,” one that is actually enhanced, rather than diminished, when that footage is subjected to repetition. Of course, this claim poses a direct challenge to Walter Benjamin’s classic decial of the decline of the aura in the age of technological reproducibility.²⁸⁵ For Benjamin, the defining characteristics of “auratic art” are uniqueness, distance, and ritual, precisely those qualities that mass media like lithography, photography, and film threaten to destroy. Benjamin pointed to the newsreel—one of Conner’s oft-used materials—as exemplifying reproductive technology’s destruction of the aura:

Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image, or better, in a facsimile, a reproduction. And the reproduction, as offered by illustrated magazines and *newsreels*, differs unmistakably from the image. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely entwined in the latter as are transitoriness and repeatability in the former.²⁸⁶

Yet, for adherents of the *re-auraticization* of found footage in avant-garde films, these works produce a new kind of aura, one premised on a *lack* of uniqueness, innate reproducibility,

²⁸⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” in *The Work of Art In the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. E. F. N Jephcott (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 19–55.

²⁸⁶ Benjamin, 23.

and historical remoteness from both profilmic event and an originally intended context, a distance rendered exponential by appropriation and re-contextualization.²⁸⁷ According to this logic, the acts of *recycling* and *re-viewing* that constitute found footage filmmaking acquire the status of ritual, whereas the material fragility of celluloid-based film—prone to scratching, fading, and decay—functions as a physical index for the widening gap of historical distance. Thus, by pushing the logic of technological reproduction to its limit, found footage films redeem themselves by acquiring a new, uncanny aura, symptomatic of pastness, physical vulnerability, and ritualized re-viewing, an aura specifically born of the conditions of technological reproduction.

Ultimately, the discourse on re-auraticization is concerned with how found footage films self-reflexively expose their material substrate, surfacing their physical fragility thus becoming allegorical ruins of their own history, and especially, of the socio-historical context from which they emerged. Rather than situate Conner's trilogy within this discourse of re-auraticization, in this chapter, I am more concerned with how Conner's film trilogy, as "motion studies," mobilize the defamiliarizing effects of repetition—that tense oscillation between body and sign—to produce sublime experience. As a result, this chapter is less interested in how the film image functions indexically or semiotically in order to reference a lost body or past event, than in unpacking the workings of time, affect, and perceptual experience that are specific to Conner's films. This is not to say that my interests are not historical and political. Crucially, Conner used

²⁸⁷ There are numerous variations on this argument in writings on appropriation in avant-garde film and video, but some especially influential examples include Lucas Hilderbrand, "Grainy Days and Mondays: Superstar and Bootleg Aesthetics," in *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 161–190; Laura U. Marks, "Loving a Disappearing Image," in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 91–110; and William C. Wees, "The Ambiguous Aura of Hollywood Stars in Avant-Garde Found-Footage Films," *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 2 (January 1, 2002): 3–18. I borrow the phrase "ambiguous aura" from Wees.

history (in the form of found footage) as a stage for this sublime drama. It is the overarching aim of this chapter to show how these “motion studies” illuminate history anew.

In *MX5* (as well as *REPORT*), repetition and ambiguity work together to unmoor an iconic image from historical time, fundamentally altering how and what it means to us. In this sense, Conner’s films deploy repetition according to the logic of the famous opening lines of Karl Marx’s 1852 essay on the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, in which Marx invokes Hegel’s observation that history tends to repeat itself, adding that “the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.”²⁸⁸ As Monroe/Hunter’s strained performance gradually devolves into an absurdly redundant display, *MX5* would initially appear to confirm Marx’s dictum. However, *MX5* (as well as *REPORT* and, as we will see, *CROSSROADS*) ultimately go much further, by pushing signification beyond tragedy and farce, to the absolute brink of comprehension. In these films, the pleasure of looking is perpetually undercut by the urge to recover some semblance of meaning in the face of overburdened signifiers, unstable narratives, perceptual excess, and repetition.

To Marx’s categories of tragedy and farce, Conner’s films thus add a third way of encountering historical repetition: as an aesthetic experience of sublime duration. This durational experience, I argue, operates not according to the rational clockwork of historical time, nor to the cyclical logic of tragedy and farce *à la* Marx and Hegel, but rather, within a sublime register wherein the present is perpetually sliced through with repetitions of the past in order to gesture towards the future. My notion of sublime time is in keeping with Walter Benjamin’s theory of time in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” which describes a “constellation” of past, present, and future, wherein “the ‘time of the now’ is shot through with chips of Messianic time,”

²⁸⁸ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 594–617.

or in other words, the present and past are conceived as proleptically anticipating what will come.²⁸⁹ In Conner's trilogy, this temporal constellation retroactively re-casts iconic historical phenomena (the deaths of Kennedy and Monroe, the atomic bomb explosion) as both real-time events and ominous future possibilities, a conflation of past, present, and future that evokes the future perfect or *futur antérieur* tense, the uncanny anticipation of what "will have been." Burdened by the weight of the past yet doomed to repeat it, these films depict historical events as simultaneously overdetermined and unresolved.

For Conner, this sublime time is associated with *in extremis* states: death, sex, total annihilation. It is catastrophic in content and eschatological in character.²⁹⁰ Like Benjamin's Judeo-Christian concept of "Messianic time," Conner's sublime time has similarly theological implications. The trilogy communicates this religious dimension by investing familiar secular imagery with sacral connotations—such as martyrdom, temptation, resurrection, spiritual transcendence, and apocalypse. Critics of the sublime note that the term is often used to "smuggle" religious meaning into secular discourse on art and science.²⁹¹ Here, I contend that in Conner's work, the sublime is recuperated as a secular category, and emerges as Conner's response to the challenge of making art after the invention of the bomb and the apocalyptic anxieties that attended it. It is precisely this threat of existential annihilation that Conner confronted in *CROSSROADS*, the third film in his trilogy, which also represents the apotheosis of his exploration into sublime time.

²⁸⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253–264.

²⁹⁰ "Eschatology" refers to a branch of theology that is concerned with death, destiny, and apocalypse; in Christianity, it is identified with the Second Coming of Christ or the Last Judgment.

²⁹¹ James Elkins, "Against the Sublime," in *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, ed. Roald Hoffmann and Iain Boyd Whyte (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 75.

CROSSROADS (1976)

The footage seen in CROSSROADS depicts a single event: “Operation Crossroads,” a series of two underwater nuclear bomb tests conducted by the U.S. military in the lagoon off of Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands.²⁹² The first day of tests, coined “Able,” was conducted on July 1, 1946, and the second, more successful and visually impressive tests, “Baker,” on July 25th. After a lengthy process of written requests and correspondence with the Department of Defense, Conner was permitted to purchase prints of the declassified Baker test footage from the National Archives in Washington, D.C., of which he only used a fraction. Besides intensifying the contrast, Conner did not significantly alter the original black-and-white footage, nor manipulate its slow-motion speeds—his artistic intervention was primarily editorial.²⁹³ Less “found” than deliberately sought-after, the footage in CROSSROADS remains under copyright with the U.S. government, and as Conner often repeated, “I only own the splices.”²⁹⁴

Operation Crossroads was as much a scientific military operation as a Cold War publicity stunt.²⁹⁵ Over seven hundred cameras and nearly half of the world’s existing film supply was on hand to document the tests, and photographers developed new equipment that would capture a

²⁹² The definitive account of Operation Crossroads is Jonathan M. Weisgall, *Operation Crossroads: The Atomic Tests at Bikini Atoll* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994).

²⁹³ Bruce Conner, “Letter to Scott MacDonald,” February 9, 1999, Carton 3, Folder 36, The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

²⁹⁴ Quoted in MacDonald, “Bruce Conner,” 255.

²⁹⁵ As discussed in Chapter One, the Bikini tests reinforced the discursive analogy between the atomic bomb and female sexuality that would become a key feature of Cold War popular culture. In the lead-up to the tests, various news outlets reported that the atomic scientists had decorated the “Able” bomb with an image of “Gilda,” Rita Hayworth’s *femme fatale* character in the Charles Vidor directed *film noir* released that same year. The story is repeated in most accounts of Operation Crossroads, including Paul S. Boyer, “The Mixed Message of Bikini,” in *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 83.

million frames every few seconds.²⁹⁶ Lauded as the most extensively documented event in human history, Operation Crossroads prompted one enthusiastic newsreel announcer to christen the tests “the motion picture spectacle of all time.”²⁹⁷ Conner includes contextualizing data in the film’s opening credits—“Operation Crossroads” “July 25, 1946,” “Bikini Atoll”—establishing the specific time and place of the Baker test in the matter-of-fact style of a conventional documentary. But over the course of the film’s thirty-seven minutes, the blast is drained of both its overtly militaristic overtones and historical specificity; instead, Conner elevates it—not unproblematically—to the status of an aesthetic event.

CROSSROADS is a deceptively straightforward film. Comprised of just twenty-three shots, it features a total of fourteen different perspectives on the explosion.²⁹⁸ Like a musical score, Conner arranged his source material into meticulous theme-and-variations on the Baker blast. Shown from a variety of different perspectives—from land, by air, and by sea—and at varying rates of speed—from real-time to slow-motion—the film is essentially an extended motion study of the explosion and its aftermath. In each shot, the sequence of events is similar: the tranquil seascape bursts upwards with the detonation, then the radius of the blast swells, balloon-like, into a dome of radioactivity, followed by a thick column of smoke and steam emanating from the dome’s center, and culminating in the gradual bloom of the mushroom cloud

²⁹⁶ These figures are cited by William C. Wees, in “Representing the Unrepresentable: Bruce Conner’s Crossroads and the Nuclear Sublime,” *INCITE: Journal of Experimental Media* no. 2 (Spring-Fall 2010). Closely paralleling with my own analysis, Wees argues that CROSSROADS’ entails a “nuclear sublime” aesthetic. His historical account of Operation Crossroads is based primarily on Weisgall’s text and on Wikipedia.

²⁹⁷ Newsreel announcer at 6:20, “First Pictures Atomic Blast!” (Universal Studios, August 7, 1946). Accessed at: http://archive.org/details/1946-07-08_First_Pictures_Atomic_Blast.

²⁹⁸ A recent restoration of the film by Michelle Silva of the Conner Family Trust in collaboration with Ross Lipman of the UCLA Film & Television Archive has demonstrated the meticulous decision-making that Conner exercised during creation of the film, with each frame reflecting specific aesthetic choices. For more on the restoration of CROSSROADS, see Ross Lipman, “Conservation at a Crossroads: The Restoration of a Film by Bruce Conner,” *Artforum* 52, no. 2 (October 2013).

(fig. 4.11). Filmed from remote distances and bird's-eye views, the blast appears graceful, almost balletic, as its plumes elegantly unfurl. Once the shockwave settles, the bomb's tranquil beauty comes to the fore, and its destructive power is but an afterthought. Gradually, repetition undercuts the familiar rhythms of suspense and climax, as it becomes clear that this unleashed power, and the time that it inhabits, are not ours to master. Anxiety subsides. The sense of time oscillates from elastic to glacial; it does not flow steadily onwards so much as accrue into a morass of duration. In essence, we are witnessing the end of the world, a preposterous, unthinkable, yet entirely real prospect. Conner invites us to get lost in this sublime expanse of terrifying beauty and confront the possibility of complete annihilation that it represents.

CROSSROADS is a study of stillness as much as movement. With its spare cuts, long takes, and decelerated pace, it marks a stylistic departure from the rapid-fire montage style and subliminal strobe of Conner's earlier films, and instead feels more closely related to static media, like large-format photography or landscape painting. One contemporary reviewer described CROSSROADS's "calm displays of cloud and water [as] reminiscent of oriental landscape painting, Bernini's fountains and Baroque aureoles."²⁹⁹ Such comparisons highlight the complex interplay of serenity and violence that characterizes Baroque style, as well as its emphasis on ornate beauty. Our window onto this apocalyptic landscape is often disorienting, especially when the camera adopts the aerial, "birds-eye" views that were recorded by unmanned drone aircraft, a perspective that combines the disciplinary connotations of the "all-seeing eye" of scopic surveillance with the metaphor of a divine, omniscient spectator. In some of these aerial shots, the battleships stationed around the radius of the blast seem to be floating in mid-air, or plummeting down a turbulent, frothing waterfall, as if the earth was suddenly flipped upside

²⁹⁹ William Moritz and Beverly O'Neill, "Fallout: Some Notes on the Films of Bruce Conner," *Film Quarterly* no. 31 (Summer 1978): 38.

down (fig. 4.12). Unmoored from gravitational space, we easily become lost in this landscape that dwarfs us in scale and force, laying bare the limits of the human body through an unrelenting encounter with the atomic sublime.

Like *REPORT*, *CROSSROADS* is divided into two sections, here marked by two distinct soundtracks, the first by composer Patrick Gleeson, the second, Terry Riley. Between each section, Conner inserts a brief sequence of black frames crossed by thin white lines, a visual reference to crosshairs of a bomb target, and to the eponymous “crossroads.” This symbol appears three times, measuring the film’s progress from beginning, middle, and end; besides the intertitles, this is the only “original” image in the entire film. The film’s first twelve minutes features Gleeson’s Moog synthesizer-based score, which re-imagines the ambient soundscape at Bikini: the faint screeches of seagulls, the sonic boom of the bomb blast, the buzz of airplanes floating above the clouds, and even the military countdown before the first detonation. Unexpectedly, all sounds—human, animal, and machine —were synthesized by Gleeson inside the studio.³⁰⁰ In contrast to the surfeit of visual documentation of Operation Crossroads, there are no extant audio recordings, since, as Gleeson has noted, microphone equipment would have been destroyed by the bomb’s shockwave. His score thus represents an ontological impossibility, or, more in keeping with disembodied bird’s eye view of the drones, the sounds within earshot of an omniscient spectator.

The second section of *CROSSROADS*, almost twice as long as the first, is accompanied by an original electronic organ composition by Terry Riley, which he released as a longer track

³⁰⁰ Author's email correspondence with Patrick Gleeson, January 26, 2014. Gleeson cites Wendy Carlos’s “Sonic Seasonings,” which features synthesized renditions of natural sounds, as well as Carlos’s “Switched-On Bach,” as major influences on his work with found sound and synthesizers during the mid-1970s.

in 1982 as “Descending Moonshine Dervishes.”³⁰¹ More rhythmic and melodic than Gleeson’s subtle ambient score, the humming tones and percussive plinks of Riley’s synth-organ evokes a futuristic hymn or electric raga, designed to facilitate a meditative, transcendent state of mind. Together, Gleeson’s and Riley’s scores endow the apocalyptic landscape of *CROSSROADS* with mystical possibility. The destruction of the physical world enacted onscreen is mirrored by the de-materialized, ethereal sounds of the synthesizer and electronic organ, implying a triumph of the metaphysical and spiritual over matter and the body. Beyond simply “accompanying” the film image, the soundtrack catalyzes this sublime confrontation with nothingness.

The catalytic role of *CROSSROADS*’s soundtrack comes into sharper focus by way of a comparison with a strikingly similar depiction of nuclear apocalypse, the finale to Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). For this legendary sequence, Kubrick paired a montage of atomic test footage—including many of the same shots of the Baker tests that Conner used in *CROSSROADS*—with a maudlin pop track, Vera Lynn’s “We’ll Meet Again.” Kubrick’s choice of a cliché love song reinforces the film’s satirical take on atomic age anxiety, embodied by its ironic directive, “stop worrying and love the bomb.” The result is an ironic commentary on the arms race and critique of Cold War rhetoric infused with dark comedy. To my knowledge, Conner never referenced *Dr. Strangelove* in relation to *CROSSROADS*, though he was an outspoken critic of Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).³⁰² Nevertheless, *CROSSROADS* registers Conner’s response to Kubrick’s ironic directive, by envisioning what the apocalypse

³⁰¹ Riley first encountered Conner through their mutual involvement with Anna Halprin and the San Francisco Tape Music Center, around pioneering experimental composer La Monte Young at Mills College. David W. Bernstein, ed., *The San Francisco Tape Music Center: 1960s Counterculture and the Avant-Garde* (University of California Press, 2008).

³⁰² In an open letter to Canyon Cinema, Conner lambasted the organization for awarding Kubrick that year’s achievement award for *2001*. See Bruce Conner, Letter to Canyon Cinema, August 6, 1968, published in *Canyon Cinemanews* (August/September 1968), re-printed in Scott MacDonald, *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor*, vol. 1, 5 vols. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 110-111.

might look—and sound—like if we were to “stop worrying,” and submit to the sublime.

Completed in 1976, the release of *CROSSROADS* coincided with thirty-year anniversary of the Bikini tests, as well as the bicentennial of the founding of the United States—two historical milestones of which Conner was acutely aware. Though *CROSSROADS*'s sublime aestheticization of the bomb might imply a disregard for historical specificity, I would argue that the film is not interested in art, beauty, or the sublime for their own sake, but rather, in problematizing cinema's capacity to represent time (and space) at a scale that transcends the human, giving new meaning to the newsreel announcer's phrase, “the motion picture spectacle of *all time*.”

The contraction, suspension, and expansion of time in *CROSSROADS* recalls another set of atomic motion studies, the stroboscopic photographic experiments executed by Harold E. Edgerton (fig. 4.13).³⁰³ In the early 1950s while a professor at MIT, Edgerton developed “rapatronic” shutter technology that allowed him to take thousands of shots per second during the above-ground atomic tests in the deserts of the southwest. The resulting images are confounding, unlike anything ever seen by the human eye. James Elkins describes his visual desperation after trying to describe these uncanny, bulbous mass of fire and smoke: “Like a constellation? Clouds? A nectarine? A bubble? Acne? A tumor? A tide pool? A watercolor painting? An opal? Nothing works.”³⁰⁴ Like Edgerton two decades previous, *CROSSROADS* demonstrates how the phenomenology of the bomb exceeds our perception of time and space, in its seemingly boundless scale and intensity.

³⁰³ For more on Edgerton's photography, see Kris Belden-Adams, “Harold Edgerton and Complications of the ‘Photographic Instant,’” *Frame: A Journal of Visual and Material Culture* no. 1 (Spring 2011): 96–109. and James Elkins, “Harold Edgerton's Rapatronic Photographs of Atomic Tests,” *History of Photography* 28, no. 1 (2004): 74–81.

³⁰⁴ Elkins, “Harold Edgerton's Rapatronic Photographs of Atomic Tests,” 76.

Yet, unlike Edgerton's photographic motion studies, which firmly situate the bomb in the historical past (even while it captures a fraction of a moment invisible to human perception), *CROSSROADS* activates a combination of different "tenses," from the present tense of cinematic spectatorship, the past tense of the archival image, and the future tense of apocalyptic possibility. In this hybrid grammar of time, the experience of the present, past, and future, of a "now" and a "then," become increasingly elastic, abstract, and porous concepts. This experience is further complicated by monotonous repetition, slow-motion, lingering shots, and extended duration, which together make the viewer feel frozen in an eternal loop.

If we were to assign the film a dominant "tense," it would be the future perfect or *futur antérieur*, the "what will have been" of speculative or science fiction, a retrospective look at an imaginary past and impossible present. In her discussion of the "heretical archive," film theorist Domietta Torlasco recognizes within the future anterior tense the inherent potential for political change, and specifically, feminist possibilities: "irreducible to the present and any autonomous temporal dimension, the future anterior embodies the promises of temporal excess and becoming, providing feminist theory with the possibility of envisioning a future that does not resemble the past."³⁰⁵ It is through this future anteriority, this envisioning of the "what will have been" as embedded in the archival documentation of the "what has been," that *CROSSROADS* invites a political reading in the form of counterfactual critical speculation, a process akin to the social commentary embedded within dystopian science fiction. In this sense, this "time-bomb," and its disorienting, hybrid temporalities, emerges as a cinematic "time-machine," shuttling between imaginary pasts and futures, and opening up new political possibilities for the present.

³⁰⁵ Domietta Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013). Torlasco's remarks on the future anterior are drawn from the work of feminist political theorist Elizabeth Grosz, especially *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 76.

Here, we return to the premise of the *trinity*—coincidentally, the name given to the first underwater atomic tests in 1945 by J. Robert Oppenheimer, a close observer of the bomb’s sublime force. In *REPORT*, Kennedy is conjured (though only momentarily glimpsed) as a messianic leader and sacrificial son, the absent center of the assassination’s Passion play, and ultimately, a Frankenstein’s monster, resurrected via spectacle. In *MARILYN TIMES FIVE*, Monroe’s surrogate is cast as an Eve-like figure, biting suggestively into the apple that will precipitate her fall from grace, as well as a Mary Magdalen, the fallen woman in search of redemption. In *CROSSROADS*, nuclear technology represents an even more horrifying incarnation of Frankenstein’s unholy creation, by unleashing a “time-bomb” that defies human perception. In each of these films, the sacred and profane, the immediacy of the “now” and the immensity of the epochal, are suspended in sublime tension.

In 1969, during the period he claimed to have given up filmmaking, Conner completed *PERMIAN STRATA* (fig. 4.14). Though considered a “minor” work within Conner’s oeuvre, it is his only film to deal explicitly with Christian themes, and thus merits some consideration here. The film utilizes about three minutes-worth of scenes from *On the Road to Damascus*, a thirteen-minute biblical short produced by Castle Films in 1949, which depicts the conversion of Saint Paul. Conner added a jokey soundtrack, Bob Dylan’s “Everybody Must Get Stoned,” and the result is a heavy-handed punchline, wherein Paul witnesses a group of persecuted Christians “get stoned” when rocks are pelted at them by a hostile crowd.³⁰⁶ One can easily imagine Conner as a

³⁰⁶ A more historically significant film from the American underground that similarly uses excerpts from a biblical short is Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1963). Yet, unlike Conner’s cinematic one-liner, Anger uses the footage in order to propose an ironic analogy between Jesus Christ and Scorpio, the film’s biker protagonist. In Anger’s hybrid queer-fascist iconography, Jesus, Elvis, and Marlon Brando are the iconoclastic heroes, and the swastika becomes a symbol of nihilistic rebellion and same-sex desire. The post-Stonewall, post-AIDS generation of queer artists also utilized images of Jesus, often aligning the suffering of gay men during the AIDS crisis with Christ’s suffering on the Cross. This allegory is quite explicit in a work like David Wojnarowicz’s *A Fire in My Belly* (1986-1987), which has been the target of numerous censorship controversies due to its direct reference to Catholic iconography, even as

schoolboy, reluctantly dapper in his church suit, cheekily imagining the joke during a screening of a low-budget bible movie during Sunday school in Wichita.

The film's title refers to Conner's amateur enthusiasm for geology, which dated back to his youth, when he would go hunting for trilobite fossils in the rocky outcrops of rural Kansas.³⁰⁷ PERMIAN STRATA thus forges a link between 1960s drug culture, where "everybody must get stoned," with the ancient history of the biblical epoch, to the massive, sublime scale of geological time. More importantly, PERMIAN STRATA anticipates Conner's nostalgic recovery of his Kansan childhood in two films from the late 1970s, produced directly after he finished CROSSROADS: TAKE THE 5:10 TO DREAMLAND (1977) and VALSE TRISTE (1978). These films testify to the interrelated significance of adolescence and the atomic bomb within Conner's cinema.

Return to Dreamland

TAKE THE 5:10 TO DREAMLAND and VALSE TRISTE are joined by common style and content. Both are printed on sepia-tinted color film stock, giving their imagery of rural life and childhood a nostalgic cast. Conner's described the films as referring to his childhood in Kansas the late 1940s, to a "pre-lapsarian" moment directly after WWII but before the full-fledged outbreak of the Cold War, thus suggesting an analogy between a political and a sexual

recently as the fall 2010 exhibition "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture" at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.

³⁰⁷ Conner recalls hunting for trilobites with Michael McClure in the Kansas Permian Strata during his teenage years in Paul Cummings, Oral history interview with Bruce Conner, April 16, 1973, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/conner73.htm>. Conner updated his account of the fossil-hunt in December 1996, documented in Steven Fama, "Childhood Experiences of Bruce Conner: A Compilation; Or, Looking for Trilobites in the Kansas Permian Strata and Other Stories from the Childhood of Bruce Conner," Unpublished manuscript, March 21, 1997, Carton 13, Folder 23, The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. BANC MSS 2000/50 c.

loss-of-innocence. Both films depict a dreamy landscape seemingly untainted by atomic age anxieties, yet haunted by an uncanny, proleptic anticipation of the future anterior, the what-will-have-been.³⁰⁸ This sense of foreboding is registered rhythmically through their quiet, deliberate pacing and oneiric sensibility, which recalls the non-sequitur narratives of Surrealist film, particularly the work of Luis Buñuel and Maya Deren.³⁰⁹

TAKE THE 5:10 TO DREAMLAND (fig. 4.15) takes its name from an original composition by Patrick Gleeson, which combines a synthesizer score with field recordings of “birds, insects, trees rustling in the wind...an infrequent single-engine prop plane and gentle waterfalls that ran through the property,” collected on the back deck of Gleeson’s home in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada in Northern California. Importantly, the music preceded the film: Gleeson played the track for Conner in his studio, and Conner returned a month later with the resulting film, which Gleeson calls “ineffably sad and graceful, another elegy, this one for our own absurd childhoods in a suddenly long gone America.”³¹⁰ In the same vein, Jonas Mekas compared the film to a poem, stating “The images, their mysterious relationships, the rhythm, and the connections impress themselves upon the unconscious. The film ends, like a poem ends, almost like a puff, like nothing.”³¹¹

³⁰⁸ Conner noted that he initially used sepia-toned stock in order to solve a problem with transferring the soundtrack, since color film stock allowed for sharper, clearer sound than black-and-white. See Conner, quoted in Scott MacDonald, “Bruce Conner,” in *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with American Independent Filmmakers*, vol. V (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 249. Conner’s continued use of sepia in *VALSE TRISTE* suggests that he considered it a valuable artistic choice that helps join the two films as a pair.

³⁰⁹ James Peterson has described these two films as “compilation narratives,” and argues against the typical emphasis on their shared Freudian dream logic in favor of a highly formal reading of their structure and organization. See James Peterson, “Bruce Conner and the Compilation Narrative,” *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3/4 (1986): 53–62.

³¹⁰ Author’s email correspondence with Patrick Gleeson, January 26, 2014.

³¹¹ Jonas Mekas in the *Soho Weekly News*, quoted on Bruce Conner’s private Vimeo site, operated by the Conner Family Trust. Accessed January 11, 2014.

Conner's next film, *VALSE TRISTE* (fig. 4.16) was similarly inspired by coming of age in middle America. Conner chose Sibelius's "sad waltz" because it was the opening soundtrack to his favorite childhood radio program, "I Love a Mystery." This choice of soundtrack recalls *A MOVIE*'s use of Respighi's *Pines of Rome*, an equally familiar (even hackneyed) orchestral score that similarly treads the line between high culture and kitsch. Originally, Conner asked Gleeson to create a synthesized rendition of Sibelius's composition for the film's soundtrack, which Gleeson imagined as "a perfect clash of camp and the infinitely real, both recklessly and tastelessly aimed at the hopeless optimism and defeat that may be the meaning of life." However, Gleeson's interest in this camp remake of Sibelius eventually waned, and Conner reverted to the original orchestral score.

Conner described *VALSE TRISTE* as follows:

Nostalgic recreation of dreamland Kansas 1947 in Toto. Theme music from I Love a Mystery radio programs (Jack, Doc, and Reggie confront the enigmatic lines of railroad trains, sheep, black cars, women exercising in an open field, grandma at the farm ...) Meanwhile, 13-year-old boy confronts reality. Sibelius grows old in Finland and becomes a national monument."³¹²

While Conner's phrase "dreamland Kansas in Toto" recalls the title of *TAKE THE 5:10 TO DREAMLAND*, it also evokes a more familiar mythological adventure to "dreamland" that began in Kansas—Dorothy's hallucinatory journey to Oz, in the company of her little dog, Toto. Importantly, Conner dates the dreamland to 1947, the year after the Bikini Atoll underwater tests, and the same year he first encountered newsreel footage of the tests in a Wichita movie theater.³¹³

Although the ominous figure of the mushroom cloud is markedly absent from its parade of

³¹² Description on Bruce Conner's private Vimeo site, operated by the Conner Family Trust. Accessed January 11, 2014.

³¹³ Regarding the Bikini footage, Conner stated, "It's just fascinating footage. I saw a lot of it when I was thirteen. At that time I thought I would see even more of it in the future, but it turns out that people are not really allowed to see very much of it. I waited to see that footage again, but nobody brought it out. One reason I make a movie is that if I don't, I won't get to see it." Quoted in MacDonald, "Bruce Conner," 255.

haunting, sepia-tinged scenes of childhood, the film nevertheless depicts Conner's arrival into adolescence as haunted by the unprecedented destructive power embodied by the bomb. In this poetic portrait of long-lost innocence, erotic maturity is braided together with an awareness of mortality, a simultaneous awakening to sex and death, the possible and the inevitable.

CROSSROADS CINEMA

If *CROSSROADS* is a time-machine that transports Conner back to his childhood in 1947, it also transports us to the following decade, to his first attempt at filmmaking in the late 1957. *A MOVIE* was inspired by a childhood cinephilia, a love of looking nurtured within darkened theatres, in friend's bedrooms, and on sun-dappled living room carpets. For Conner, looking is a dangerous act, as told in the periscope peep-show scenario that climaxes with an atomic blast. *CROSSROADS* represents his Sisyphean attempt to satisfy this love of looking once and for all, to master the unmasterable image and contain an uncontainable threat. It also represents the maturation of Conner's adolescent scopophilia into a full-fledged epistemophilia, that innate human desire to *know* and to *understand* that precipitated the expulsion from an Edenic paradise and full recognition of mortality. Conner's cinema situates itself at this existential crossroads, between an unequivocal embrace of our fallen nature and the pursuit of transcendence from the inevitabilities of failure, unfulfillment, suffering, and death. *CROSSROADS*, the third and final piece in his late found footage trilogy, thus represents the culmination of Conner's struggle to come to terms with the representational and existential dilemmas that are threaded inextricably through each of his films—from found footage collage to psychedelic heterotopia, music video to motion study.

CONCLUSION

In his first two decades of making films, Conner cast himself in many roles: from the sailor at the periscope, peering surreptitiously at the forbidden fruit; the blind African-American musician, yearning for his lost vision; the mushroom-hunter, tripping through exotic landscapes and mental topographies; the celebrity-martyr, victim of mass media exploitation; the time-traveler, shuttling back and forth through history; the archaeologist, excavating the ruins of his childhood to recover new possibilities in the “what-will-have-been”; and finally, as the self-annihilating Cold War subject of *BOMBHEAD*. However, the role that he is most often remembered for, “the father of music video,” is one into which he was retroactively cast, not one he endorsed or readily admitted to.

As described in the previous chapters, many of Conner 1960s films—especially *COSMIC RAY*, *BREAKAWAY* and *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*—are frequently referred to as “proto-music videos.” Yet it wasn’t until the late 1970s that Conner would begin to make films that were deliberately intended as promotional music videos, even if they would never be shown on the nascent network devoted to this new genre, MTV. However, I argue that Conner’s “music videos” embody a postmodern sensibility that is at odds with the pathos and visceral intensity of his previous films.

Conner’s late “music video” phase coincides with his encounter with live punk performance in 1977. That year, Toni Basil invited him to attend a performance by the new wave punk band Devo at Mabuhay Gardens, a key venue for the Bay Area’s nascent punk subculture. Conner soon became the Mabuhay’s in-house photographer and occasional cinematographer, documenting almost a year’s worth of performances with his camera. Conner called his activities at Mabuhay “combat photography,” emphasizing the confrontational physicality of punk

collectivity. Like war journalism, Conner's activities at Mabuhay required him to become "embedded" on the dance floor and stage, as a full participant in the wild activities of the crowd and performers alike. Even though the aggressive nihilism of Mabuhay seem in stark contrast to the psychedelic ecstasy of the Avalon light shows, or the flirtatious sincerity of Basil's performance in *BREAKAWAY*, Conner nevertheless drew from the same set of techniques developed during his mid-1960s "psychedelic turn" to document the punk performances. With their smeared moving forms, kinetic compositions, unconventional perspectives (often from the "worms-eye view" of the dance floor), and intimate proximities, Conner's "combat photography" not only recalls the aesthetics of Basil's dynamic, disintegrating body in *BREAKAWAY*, it also conveys a similar sense of performative immediacy and subcultural communion that had initially attracted Conner to the Avalon scene a decade earlier.

Conner's relationship to the punk scene extended to his filmmaking practice, too. In 1978, Devo commissioned him to make a film to accompany their first single, "Mongoloid." The result is a comical found footage pastiche of Cold War-era educational films, civil defense propaganda, and advertisements, which matches the ironic sensibility of Devo's lyrics and their retro-futurist sound. Conner's sarcastic summary of the film underscores its parody of Cold War educational films:

A documentary exploring the manner in which a determined young man overcame a basic mental defect and became a useful member of society. Insightful editing techniques reveal the dreams, ideals and problems that face a large segment of the American male population. Educational. Background music written and performed by the DEVO orchestra.

After completing *MONGOLOID*, Conner was introduced to The Talking Heads' frontman David Byrne and experimental composer Brian Eno, who commissioned him to make films to accompany two tracks of their pioneering work of postmodern musical sampling, *My*

Life in the Bush of Ghosts (1981).³¹⁴ For *MEA CULPA* (1981), Conner produced a montage of animated visualizations from vintage educational and scientific films, in which abstract shapes and patterns are used to illustrate the movement of particles, electrons, sound waves, and other phenomena that are invisible to the naked eye. Paired with Eno and Byrne's trance-like electronic composition, these scientific animations are transformed into rhythmic "visual music" in the style of 1920s abstract animation, such as Hans Richter's *Rhythmus 21* (1921). Conner's other music video for Byrne and Eno, *AMERICA IS WAITING* (1981), is a compilation montage of found footage, very similar in content and tone to the Cold War-era propaganda, advertising, and military footage used two decades earlier in *A MOVIE* and *COSMIC RAY*, and later, in *MONGOLOID*.³¹⁵

Thus, inasmuch as *MONGOLOID*, *MEA CULPA*, and *AMERICA IS WAITING* offer a pastiche of Cold War visual culture, they also function as self-pastiches of Conner's own signature style of found footage montage. In contrast to the complex self-reflexivity, existential anxiety, and affective charge of early films like *A MOVIE* and *COSMIC RAY* and the later found footage motion studies, or the ludic, psychedelic optimism of films like *BREAKAWAY* and *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*, Conner's late "music videos" appear by comparison more ideologically and emotionally straightforward, especially in the case of *MEA CULPA*, which is more of a formal exercise in masterful rhythmic montage (albeit visually impressive). I would argue that these late works signal the decline of Conner's atomic sublime aesthetic during the late 1970s and 1980s, a decade marked by a neo-conservative reaction heralded by Reagan's

³¹⁴ For more on Conner's use of found footage in relation to Byrne and Eno's sampling aesthetics, see David Laderman, "Let's Get Found: Music Sampling, Found Footage and My Life in the Bush of Ghosts," *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies* no. 21 (October 2011).

³¹⁵ A close analysis of *AMERICA IS WAITING* is provided in Scott Cook, "The Uncanny Resurrections of 'America Is Waiting,'" *Artforum* 20, no. 5 (January 1982): 34–37.

heightened Cold War rhetoric, revival of the arms race, and politically regressive economic policies. In this regard, it is worth noting that Conner's filmmaking went on hiatus during the 1980s, largely as a result of health issues related to the heavy drinking he engaged in during his involvement in the punk scene, problems that plagued him for the rest of his life until his death in 2008 at the age of 74.

Despite his declining participation in the art and film worlds during the final decades of his life, Conner's artistic legacy has been widely felt, from the contemporary art world to the new media ecology that structures our everyday lives. Found footage appropriation is a relied-upon artistic strategy for a number of noted experimental filmmakers, such as Craig Baldwin, Abigail Child, and Bill Morrison, and for visual artists working with video, such as Douglas Gordon, Candice Breitz, and Christian Marclay, alongside countless others who work with appropriated moving-images.³¹⁶ Of course, the practice of re-using film footage is not limited to experimental film and video art; it is also a ubiquitous presence in the mainstream media, from broadcast news to documentary, advertising to music video, which provide constant reminders of the fact that found footage doesn't necessarily have to serve a critical function, and is, in fact, just as readily deployed for the purposes of cultural affirmation and profit-generation.

As pioneering works of moving-image appropriation, Conner's films raise issues that have acquired increasing urgency with the proliferation of digital media, such as intellectual property, copyright and "creative commons." They also serve as a model for many contemporary forms of cultural appropriation and creative "recycling," such as culture jamming, video remixing, super-cuts, mash-ups, and fan videos, genres that have become increasingly prevalent with the rise of user-generated and media-sharing websites such as YouTube and Vimeo. Before

³¹⁶ For more examples of contemporary video artists who employ found footage, see the exhibition catalogue *Cut: Film as Found Object in Contemporary Video*, ed. Stephano Basilico, Lawrence Lessig and Rob Yeo (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Art Museum, 2004).

his death in 2008, Conner became aware of the possibilities and advantages offered by computer-based editing, and, with some apprehension and much assistance, embarked on creating digital revisions of some of his earlier works. Yet, instead of utilizing the inherent potential of digital media—with its vast archives of searchable web-based materials, and the comparatively quick and inexpensive post-production capacities offered by various software—to rehearse his trademark found footage style (as in his late music videos), Conner instead used computer technology to create what is perhaps his most visionary, poetic, abstract work, *EASTER MORNING* (2008), his final film and the capstone of his atomic sublime aesthetic.

EASTER MORNING is a digital re-edit of an unfinished 1966 film called *EASTER MORNING RAGA*. It combines multiple exposures of flowering plants and brightly colored streetlights with images of a nude woman, Suzanne Mowat, seated beside a windowsill, close-ups on an oriental rug, and striking shots of a white stone crucifix standing against a bright blue San Francisco skyline (fig. 5.1). Using digital editing software, Conner and his assistant, Michelle Silva, multiplied the frame rate and stretched the duration of the original 8mm Kodachrome footage, much like the step-printed, elongated version of *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* produced in 1996. Like that film, *EASTER MORNING* also features a Terry Riley soundtrack, *In C* (1964), a phase composition written for variable musical ensembles, here performed on ancient Chinese instruments by the Shanghai Film Orchestra. The repetitive, archaic sounds of this Chinese interpretation of Riley's score enhances the otherworldly, ritualistic connotations of *EASTER MORNING* (originally called "RAGA"), reinforcing the theme of bodily transcendence that is laced throughout its mystical imagery and is explicitly invoked by its religious title.

EASTER MORNING exhibits the psychedelic opticality, graphic superimpositions and rhythmic editing of Conner's mid-1960s filmic aesthetic—especially LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS—along with the same system of symbols and themes that recur throughout his body of work: the nude female body, resurrection and redemption, the Christian cross, and even childhood memories, here in the form of the quasi-floral patterns on the oriental rug, the images that prompted Conner's first out-of-body, visionary experience at age eleven. The title of EASTER MORNING refers to the sunrise service performed during the springtime celebration of Christ's resurrection, situating the film within the distinctly Messianic time of the “what will have been,” of death and salvation. EASTER MORNING thus returns us to the cyclical temporalities and oscillating bodies of Conner's earlier films—from the “no end of the beginning” loop of LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS, to the flickering body and “looking-glass” time of BREAKAWAY, and finally, to the profane resurrections of REPORT, MX5, and CROSSROADS. In light of EASTER MORNING's poetic embrace of mortality as physical transcendence, the postmodern self-pastiche of Conner's punk-era films emerge as more aberrant than typical, however Conneresque they might initially appear. To encounter Conner's final film thus requires us to look beyond the typecasting of Conner as the “father of music video” towards the constellation of roles he assumed across a multi-dimensional, deeply interdisciplinary artistic career.

As a circuitous loop through five decades of his filmmaking, this dissertation has surveyed Conner's filmmaking at a series of historical, cultural, personal, aesthetic, and conceptual crossroads. Like the self-annihilating portrait in BOMBHEAD, each of Conner's films is situated at the explosive intersection of biography and history, authorial intent and social context. To encounter Conner's cinema at the crossroads is to come to terms with its relationship

to a specific historical moment, as well as its asymptotic pursuit of transcendence from the specificities of time and place. Conner's crossroads cinema thus provides not just a lens onto the past, a glimpse backwards at paths taken and avoided, but better yet, a telescope—or even, a periscope—aimed ahead towards new horizons of possibility, in anticipation of (im)perfect futures yet to come.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Acland, Charles R. *Swift Viewing: The Popular Life of Subliminal Influence*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Aitken, Doug. "Interview with Bruce Conner." In *Broken Screen: 26 Conversations with Doug Aitken: Expanding the Image, Breaking the Narrative*, edited by Noel Daniel, 86–96. New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2006.
- Albright, Thomas. *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-1980: An Illustrated History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985.
- Alexander, Thomas Kent. "San Francisco's Hipster Cinema." *Film Culture*, no. 44 (1967): 70–74.
- Alloway, Lawrence. "The American Sublime." *Living Arts* 1, no. 2 (June 1963): 11–22.
- Anker, Steve, Kathy Geritz, and Steve Seid, eds. *Radical Light: Alternative Film & Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010.
- Anthony, Gene. *The Summer of Love: Haight-Ashbury at Its Highest*. Millbrae, California: Celestial Arts, 1980.
- Antin, David. "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium." In *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, edited by John G. Hanhardt, 147–66. Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986.
- Arthur, Paul. *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- — —. "The Status of Found Footage." *Spectator: The University of Southern California Journal of Film and Television* 20, no. 1 (Fall -Winter 2000 1999): 57–69.
- Balsom, Erika. "A Cinema in the Gallery, A Cinema in Ruins." *Screen* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 411–27.
- Banes, Sally. *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993.
- Barron, Stéphanie, Sheri Bernstein, and Ilene Susan Fort. "Altered State(s): California Art and the Inner World." In *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900 - 2000*. Los Angeles County Museum of Art/University of California Press, 2000.
- Bass, Warren. "The Past Restructured: Bruce Conner and Others." *Journal of the University Film Association*, no. 33 (1981): 15–22.
- Bazin, André. "Ontology of the Photographic Image." In *What is Cinema? Volume One*, edited by Hugh Gray, 9–16. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967.

- Beckman, Karen. *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Belden-Adams, Kris. "Harold Edgerton and Complications of the 'Photographic Instant.'" *Frame: A Journal of Visual and Material Culture*, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 96–109.
- Belting, Hans. "Heavenly Images and Earthly Portraits: St. Luke's Picture and 'Unpainted' Originals in Rome and the Eastern Empire." In *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, 47–77. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Benjamin, Walter. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 155–200. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.
- . "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version." In *The Work of Art In the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, edited by Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, translated by E. F. N. Jephcott, 19–55. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.
- . "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 253–64. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.
- Bernstein, David W., ed. *The San Francisco Tape Music Center: 1960s Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*. University of California Press, 2008.
- Birnbaum, Dara. *Rough Edits: Popular Image Video Works 1977-1980*. Edited by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. Nova Scotia Pamphlets. Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1987.
- Biskind, Peter. *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock'n'Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.
- Bovi, Michele. *Da Carosone a Cosa Nostra: Gli Antenati Del Videoclip*. Rome: Coniglio Editore, 2007.
- Boyer, Paul S. "The Mixed Message of Bikini." In *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, 82–92. New York: Pantheon, 1985.
- Brakhage, Stan. *Film at Wit's End: Eight Avant-Garde Filmmakers*. McPherson & Company, 1989.
- Braun, Marta. *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)*. University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- "Bruce Conner." *Film Comment* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1969): 16–25.
- Buchloh, Benjamin H.D. "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art." *Artforum* XXI, no. 1 (September 1982): 43–56.

- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Penguin Books, 1998.
- Buskirk, Martha, and Mignon Nixon. *The Duchamp Effect*. MIT Press, 1996.
- Chignon, Niles, ed. *The Camp Followers' Guide!* New York: Avon Books, 1965.
- Cocks, Jay. "Cinema: Norman's Phantasmagoria." *Time Magazine*, November 15, 1971.
- Coffman, Elizabeth. "Women in Motion: Loie Fuller and the 'Interpenetration' of Art and Science." *Camera Obscura* 17, no. 1 49 (January 1, 2002): 73–105.
- Conner, Bruce. "Letter to Scott MacDonald," February 9, 1999. Carton 3, Folder 36. The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- Cook, Scott. "The Uncanny Resurrections of 'America Is Waiting.'" *Artforum* 20, no. 5 (January 1982): 34–37.
- Cornwell, Regina. "Structural Film: Ten Years Later." *The Drama Review* 23, no. 3 (September 1979): 77–92.
- Crow, Thomas, and Thomas E. Crow. *Modern Art in the Common Culture*. Yale University Press, 1998.
- Crowther, Paul. "The Kantian Sublime, the Avant-Garde and the Postmodern: A Critique of Lyotard." In *Jean-Francois Lyotard*, edited by Victor E. Taylor and Gregg Lambert, 67–75. *Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*. Routledge, 2006.
- Cummings, Paul. Oral history interview with Bruce Conner, April 16, 1973. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/conner73.htm>.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.
- Doane, Mary Ann. "Gilda: Epistemology as Striptease." In *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, 99–118. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Dudziak, Mary L. *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Elkins, James. "Against the Sublime." In *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, edited by Roald Hoffmann and Iain Boyd Whyte, 20–42. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- — —. "Harold Edgerton's Rapatronic Photographs of Atomic Tests." *History of Photography* 28, no. 1 (2004): 74–81.
- Engelbach, Barbara., Friederike Wappler, and Hans Winkler, eds. *Looking for Mushrooms: Beat Poets, Hippies, Funk, Minimal Art, San Francisco, 1955-68*. Cologne, Germany: Museum Ludwig/Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Koenig, 2008.

- Erenberg, Lewis A. "Things to Come: Swing Bands, Bebop, and the Rise of a Postwar Jazz Scene." In *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, edited by Lary May, 221–45. University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Fama, Steven. "Childhood Experiences of Bruce Conner: A Compilation; Or, Looking for Trilobites in the Kansas Permian Strata and Other Stories from the Childhood of Bruce Conner." Unpublished manuscript, March 21, 1997. Carton 13, Folder 23. The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- "First Pictures Atomic Blast!" Universal Studios, August 7, 1946.
http://archive.org/details/1946-07-08_First_Pictures_Atomic_Blast.
- Gill, June M. "The Films of Gunvor Nelson." *Film Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 28–36.
- Gleason, Ralph. "One Wild Night-A Trips Festival." *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 24, 1966, sec. On the Town.
- Gleeson, Patrick. "Your Work with Bruce Conner," January 26, 2014.
- Gosse, Johanna. Interview with Jean Conner, April 12, 2013.
- Hales, Peter B. "The Atomic Sublime." *American Studies* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 5–31.
- Haller, Robert. "Excerpts of an Interview with Bruce Conner Conducted in July of 1971." *Film Culture* 67/68/69 (1979): 191–94.
- Harrison, Charles, and Paul J. Wood. *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003.
- Hatch, Kevin. "'It Has to Do with the Theater': Bruce Conner's Ratbastards." *October*, no. 127 (Winter 2009): 109–32.
- . *Looking for Bruce Conner*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012.
- Hendershot, Cynthia. *Anti-Communism and Popular Culture in Mid-Century America*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2003.
- . *I Was a Cold War Monster: Horror Films, Eroticism, and the Cold War Imagination*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State Popular Press, 2001.
- . *Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction Film*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State Popular Press, 1999.
- Henrikson, Margot A. *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997.
- Herzog, Amy. "Illustrating Music: The Impossible Embodiments of the Jukebox Film." In *Medium Cool: Music Videos from Soundies to Cellphones*, edited by Roger Beebe and Jason Middleton, 30–58. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

- Hijiya, James A. "The Gita of J. Robert Oppenheimer." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 144, no. No. 2 (June 2000): 123–67.
- Hilderbrand, Lucas. "Grainy Days and Mondays: Superstar and Bootleg Aesthetics." In *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright*, 161–90. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009.
- Hopkins, Henry. *Dennis Hopper: A System of Moments*. Edited by Peter Noever. Hatje Cantz, 2001.
- Hopps, Walter. "Bruce Conner." *Bomb*, no. 80 (Summer 2002): 8–11.
- Hudina, Chuck. "Bruce Conner: Visitor in the World." *Release Print*, March 1986.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986.
- James, David. *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- — —. "Expanded Cinema in Los Angeles: The Single Wing Turquoise Bird." *Millenium Film Journal*, no. 43/44 (Summer 2005): 9–31.
- James, David E. *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005.
- Jameson, Frederic. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." In *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, 111–25. Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983.
- Jenkins, Bruce. Bruce Conner in Telephone Conversation with Bruce Jenkins of the Walker Art Center Film/Video Department, February 26, 1997. Carton 16, Folder 1. The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- — —. "Bruce Conner's Report: Contesting Camelot." In *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema*, edited by Ted Perry, 236–51. Indiana University Press, 2006.
- — —. "Explosion in a Film Factory: The Cinema of Bruce Conner." In *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II*, 184–223. Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1999.
- Jones, Caroline A. "The Romance of the Studio and the Abstract Expressionist Sublime." In *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist*, 1–59. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Joselit, David. *Feedback: Television Against Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.
- — —. *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp, 1910-1941*. MIT Press, 2001.
- Joseph, Branden W. "'My Mind Split Open': Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable." *Grey Room*, no. 08 (July 1, 2002): 80–107.

- Kahn, Douglas. "Cruelty and the Beast: Antonin Artaud and Michael McClure." In *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*, 322–59. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Edited by Paul Guyer. Translated by Eric Matthews and Paul Guyer. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- . *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1960.
- Karlstrom, Paul. Oral History Interview with Bruce Conner, August 12, 1974. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/conner74.htm>.
- . Oral History Interview with George Herms, December 10, 1993. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-george-herms-12275>.
- . Oral History Interview with Larry Jordan, July 30, 1996. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-larry-jordan-12216>.
- Kasson, John F. *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1978.
- Kilgore, Michael. "Bruce Conner's Dream-Like Films." *Tampa Tribune*, May 27, 1979.
- Kim, Ji-hoon. "The Post-Medium Condition and the Explosion of Cinema." *Screen* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 114–23.
- Koerner, Joseph Leo. *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*. University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Krauss, Rosalind E. *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2000.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Women's Time." In *The Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- Kuenzli, Rudolf E. *Dada and Surrealist Film*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996.
- Laderman, David. "Let's Get Found: Music Sampling, Found Footage and My Life in the Bush of Ghosts." *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies*, no. 21 (October 2011).
- Laplanche, Jean. *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.
- Leary, Timothy. "Languages: Energy Systems Sent and Received." *Etc.: A Review of General Semantics* XXII, no. 4 (December 1965): 431–60.

- Leary, Timothy, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert. *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*. New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1964.
- Leider, Philip. "Bruce Conner: A New Sensibility." *Artforum* 1, no. 6 (December 1962): 30–31.
- Lesh, Phil. *Searching for the Sound: My Life with the Grateful Dead*. Hachette Digital, Inc., 2007.
- Levin, Erica. "Social Media: The News in Artists' Film, Performance, and Experimental Television After 1960." PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2014.
- Lewallen, Constance M., and Steve Seid. *Ant Farm, 1968-1978*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.
- Leyda, Jay. *Films Beget Films: A Study of the Compilation Film*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1964.
- Lipman, Ross. "Conservation at a Crossroads: The Restoration of a Film by Bruce Conner." *Artforum*, October 2013.
- Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft : Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Liotard, Jean-Francois. "Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime." *Artforum* 20, no. 8 (April 1982): 64–69.
- . *The Postmodern Condition: A Report On Knowledge*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- . "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde." *Artforum* 22, no. 8 (April 1984): 36–43.
- MacDonald, Scott. "Bruce Conner." In *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with American Independent Filmmakers*, V:244–56. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988.
- . *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor*. Vol. 1. 5 vols. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008.
- Mailer, Norman. "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster." *Dissent*, Summer 1957.
- Marcus, Greil. *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock "N" Roll Music*. E.P. Dutton, 1976.
- Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso. *Critical Writings: New Edition*. Macmillan, 2007.
- Marks, Laura U. "Loving a Disappearing Image." In *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, 91–110. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- Marx, Karl. "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte." In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, 594–617. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978.
- Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.

- May, Elaine Tyler. "Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb." In *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 89–108. Basic Books, 1988.
- Mekas, Jonas. *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971*. New York: Macmillan, 1972.
- Mellencamp, Patricia. "Video Politics." In *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video, and Feminism*, 45–63. Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Miller, Dana, ed. *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective*. New York; New Haven: Whitney Museum of American Art; Distributed by Yale University Press, 2012.
- Miller, Perry. *The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965.
- Morgan, Bill. *The Works of Allen Ginsberg, 1941 - 1994: A Descriptive Bibliography*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995.
- Moritz, William, and Beverly O'Neill. "Fallout: Some Notes on the Films of Bruce Conner." *Film Quarterly*, no. 31 (Summer 1978): 36–41.
- Mosen, David. "Report by Bruce Conner." *Film Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Spring 1966): 54–56.
- Mulvey, Laura. *Death 24x A Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008.
- . "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.
- Nadel, Alan. *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age*. Duke University Press, 1995.
- Newman, Barnett. "The Sublime Is Now." *Tiger's Eye* 1, no. 6 (December 1948): 51–53.
- Norden, Martin F. "A Report on Bruce Conner's 'Report.'" In *Underground U.S.A.: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon*, edited by Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider, 76–85. Columbia University Press, 2003.
- Nye, David E. "Atomic Bomb and Apollo XI: New Forms of the Dynamic Sublime." In *American Technological Sublime*, 225–56. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.
- Obrist, Hans Ulrich, and Gunnar B. Kvaran. Unpublished Interview with Bruce Conner, 2005. Carton 16, Folder 14. The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- Oppenheimer, Robin. "Maximal Art: The Origins and Aesthetics of West Coast Light Shows." *Rhizome*, April 15, 2009. <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/apr/15/maximal-art-the-origins-and-aesthetics-of-west-coal/>.
- Osterweil, Ara. "The Last Place on Earth? Allegories of Deplacialization in Dennis Hopper's The Last Movie." In *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image*, edited by John

- David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel, 181–208. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- Owens, Craig. *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*. University of California Press, 1994.
- Packard, Vance. *The Hidden Persuaders*. New York: D. McKay Co., 1957.
- Paulsen, Kris. “In the Beginning, There Was the Electron.” *X-TRA* 15, no. 2 (Winter 2013).
- Perry, Charles. *A History of the Haight-Ashbury*. New York: Vintage Books, 1985.
- Peterson, James. “Bruce Conner and the Compilation Narrative.” *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3/4 (1986): 53–62.
- Porter, Jenelle, ed. *Dance with Camera*. Philadelphia, PA: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2010.
- Richards, Nancy. Unpublished Interview with Bruce Conner, October 6, 1984. Carton 15, Folder 38. The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- Riedlinger, Thomas J., ed. *The Sacred Mushroom Seeker: Essays for R. Gordon Wasson*. Portland, OR: Dioscorides Press, 1990.
- Robert Zagone. “Research Question about KQED,” April 3, 2013.
- Rogin, Michael. “Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies.” *Representations*, no. 6 (Spring 1984): 1–36.
- Rosenblum, Robert. *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*. Harper & Row, 1975.
- — —. “The Abstract Sublime.” *Art News* 59, no. 10 (February 1961).
- Roszak, Theodore. *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995.
- Ruscha, Ed, Bruce Conner, and Elizabeth Armstrong. “Interviews with Ed Ruscha and Bruce Conner.” *October* 70, no. The Duchamp Effect (Autumn 1994): 55–59.
- Schwabsky, Barry. *Bruce Conner Drawings Volume I: 1960 to 1968*. Los Angeles, CA: Kohn Turner Gallery, 1999.
- Sculatti, Gene. *San Francisco Nights: The Psychedelic Music Trip, 1965-1968*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985.
- Serlin, David. “The Clean Room/Love Machines: Unwinding the Technology of the Scopitone.” *Cabinet Magazine*, no. 2 (Spring 2001).
<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/2/cleanroom.php>.
- Shedlin, Michael. “Marilyn.” *Film Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (Spring 1974): 47.

- “Shroud of Turin Research Project.” *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, August 29, 2013. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Shroud_of_Turin_Research_Project&oldid=564504785.
- Silverman, Kaja. *The Acoustic Mirror the Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- Simon, Art. *Dangerous Knowledge: The JFK Assassination in Art and Film*. Temple University Press, 2010.
- Sitney, P. Adams. “Structural Film.” *Film Culture*, no. 47 (Summer 1969): 1–10.
- — —. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1990.
- Spottiswoode, Raymond. *A Grammar of the Film*. University of California Press, 1965.
- Stevenson, Jack. “The Jukebox That Ate the Cocktail Lounge: The Story of Scopitone.” In *Land of a Thousand Balconies: Discoveries and Confessions of B-Movie Archaeologist*, 31–46. Manchester, UK: Headpress/Critical Vision, 2003.
- Stiles, Kristine. Telephone Interview with Bruce Conner, December 17, 1985. Carton 17, Folder 22. The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- Sullivan, Margaret A. “The Witches of Dürer and Hans Baldung Grien.” *Renaissance Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 333–401.
- Sundholm, John, ed. *Gunvor Nelson and the Avant-Garde*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlagsgruppe, 2003.
- Torlasco, Domietta. *The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Uroskie, Andrew V. *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art*. University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- Wasson, R. Gordon. “Seeking the Magic Mushroom.” *Life Magazine*, no. 13 (May 1957): 100–120.
- Wees, William C. *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films*. New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993.
- — —. “Representing the Unrepresentable: Bruce Conner’s Crossroads and the Nuclear Sublime.” *INCITE: Journal of Experimental Media*, no. 2 (Spring-Fall 2010).
- — —. “The Ambiguous Aura of Hollywood Stars in Avant-Garde Found-Footage Films.” *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 2 (January 1, 2002): 3–18.

- Weisgall, Jonathan M. *Operation Crossroads: The Atomic Tests at Bikini Atoll*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994.
- Whereatt, Robert. "Poet Says City Trains, Then Stifles Its Talent." *Wichita Eagle*, February 6, 1966.
- Williams, Linda. "Prehistory: The Frenzy of the Visible." In *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* 34–57. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989.
- Wolfe, Tom. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968.
- Yau, John. "In Conversation: Bruce Conner with John Yau." *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 2004. <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2004/11/art/bruce-conner-in-conversation>.
- Youngblood, Gene. *Expanded Cinema*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970.

FIGURES

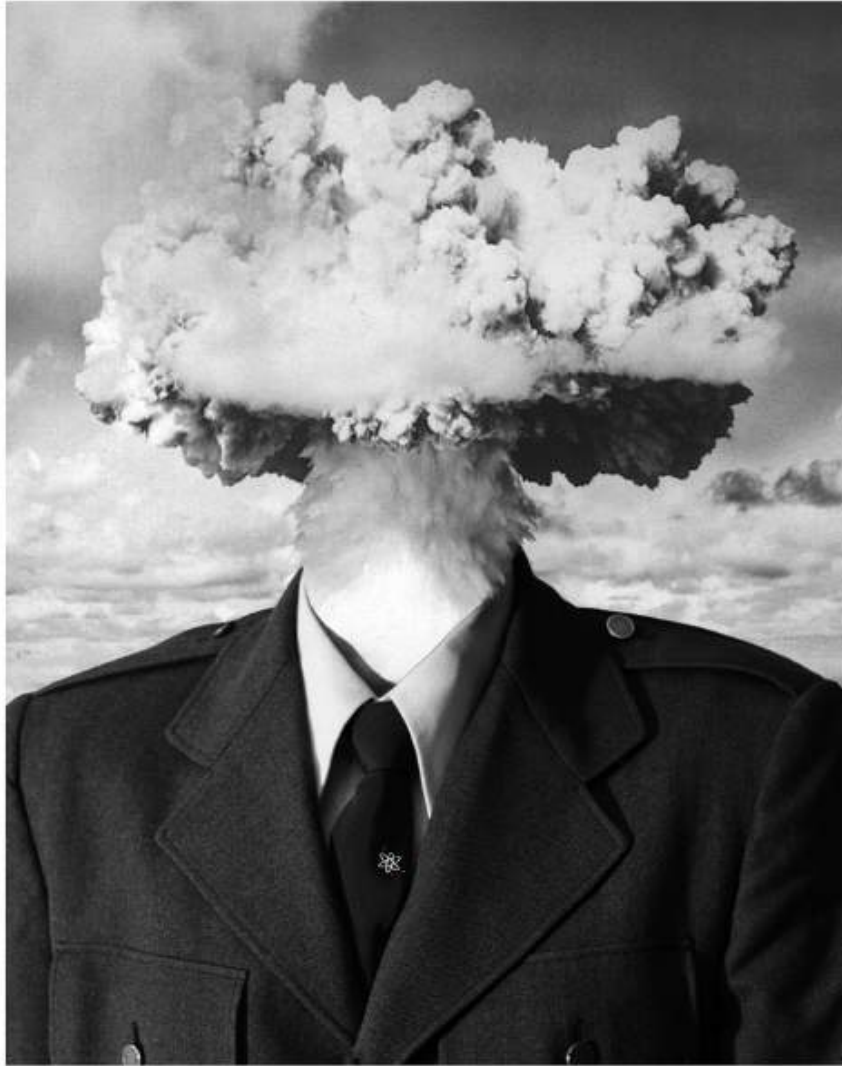


Figure I.1: BOMBHEAD (1989), photo collage. Based on photograph by Edmund Shea and image from the National Archives, Washington, D.C.



Figure 1.1: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still

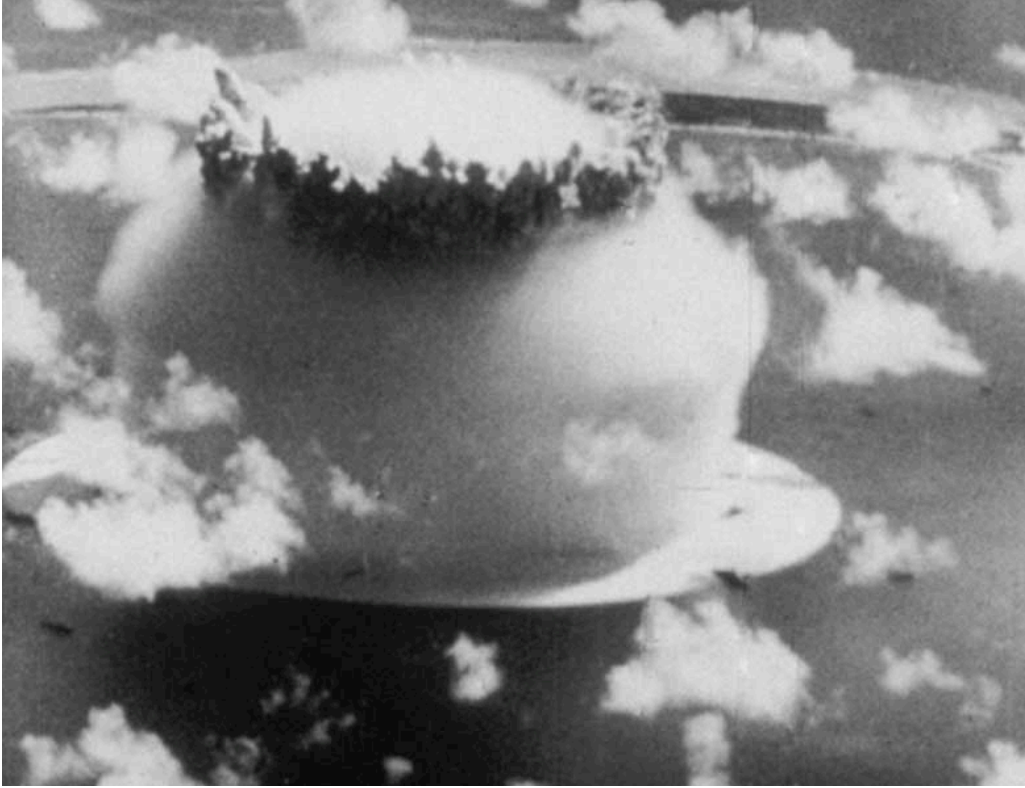


Figure 1.2: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still



Figure 1.3: “Invasion U.S.A.” promotional display featuring an air raid siren in the lobby at The Orpheum Theater, Wichita, Kansas (February 1952). Photographer unknown. Photo courtesy of Meredith “Millie” Hill Collection of Orpheum Theatre and John Ebersson Movie Palaces Material, Wichita State University Libraries Dept. of Special Collections. wsu_ms2001-06.4.10.1



Figure 1.4: Left to right: Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, and Bruce Conner, chanting at Ginsberg's apartment (1965). Photographer: Larry Keenan



Figure 1.5: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still



Figure 1.6: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still

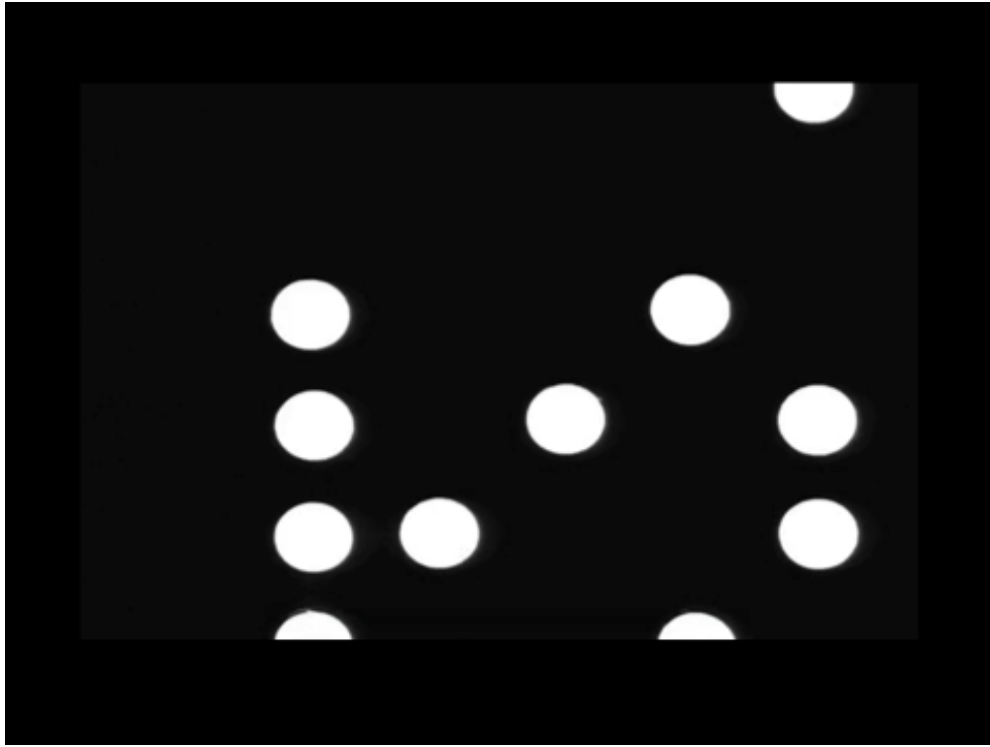


Figure 1.7: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still

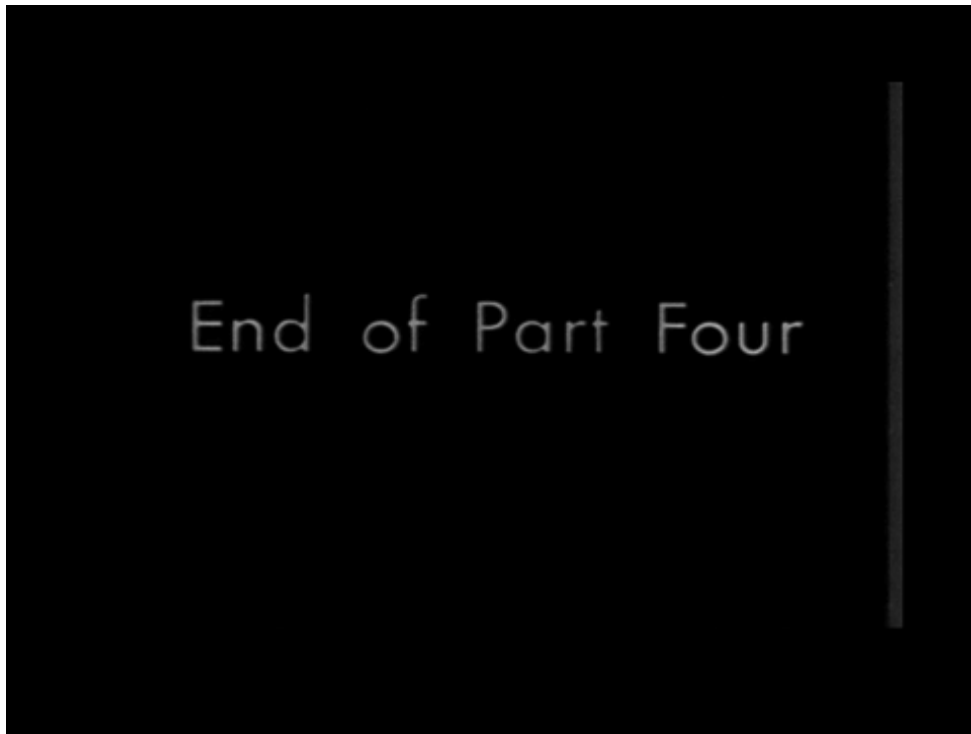


Figure 1.8: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still



Figure 1.9: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still



Figure 1.10: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still

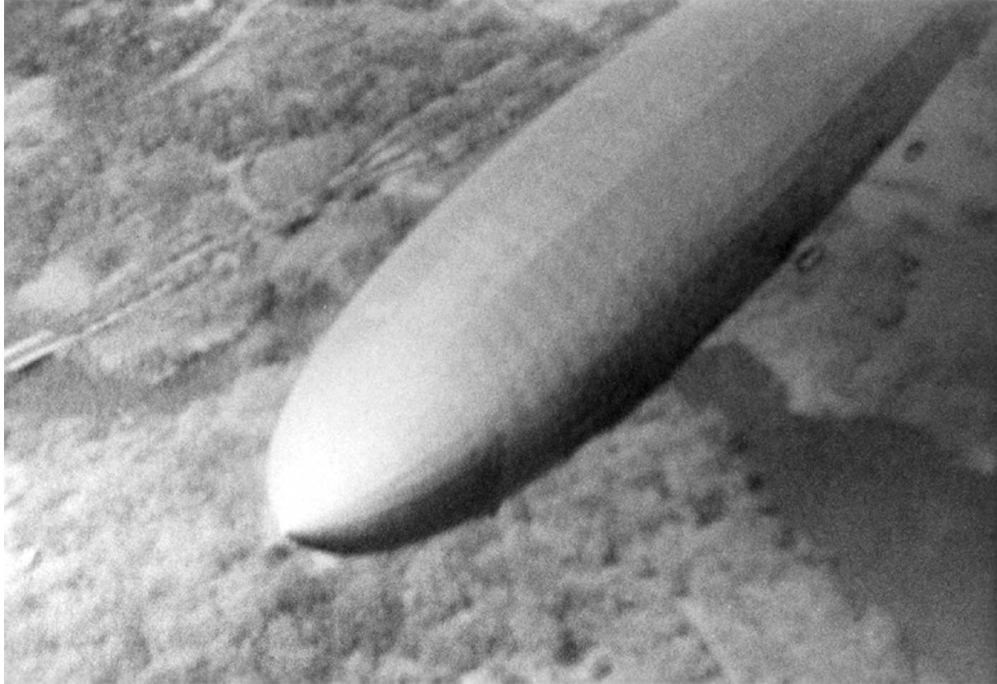


Figure 1.11: A MOVIE (1958), 16mm, film still



Figure 1.12: Promotional photo of Rita Hayworth, captioned: “The Picture on the Atomic Bomb.” “Gilda—Femme Fatale: Scientists, Engineers Christen Test A-Bomb,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (June 30, 1946)



Figure 1.13: “Miss Atomic Bomb” (1957). Model Lee Merlin pictured wearing mushroom cloud swimsuit. Photographer: Don English / Las Vegas News Bureau



Figure 1.14: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still



Figure 1.15: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still



Figure 1.16: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still



Figure 1.17: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still



Figure 1.18: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still



Figure 1.19: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still



Figure 1.20: Slim Pickens loving the bomb, in *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, USA, 1964), film still



Figure 1.21: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still

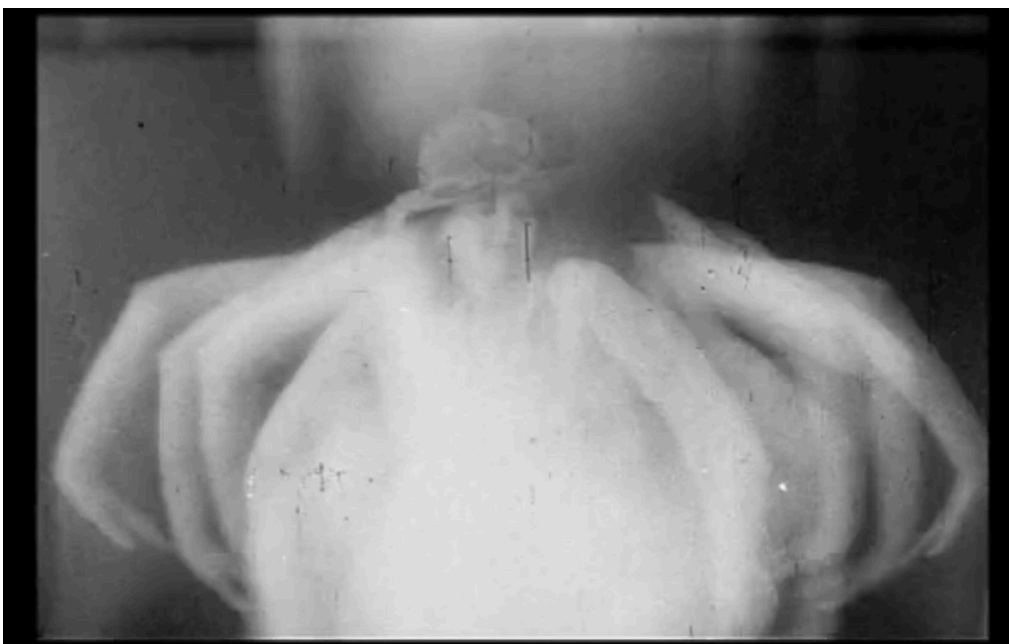


Figure 1.22: COSMIC RAY (1961), 16mm, film still

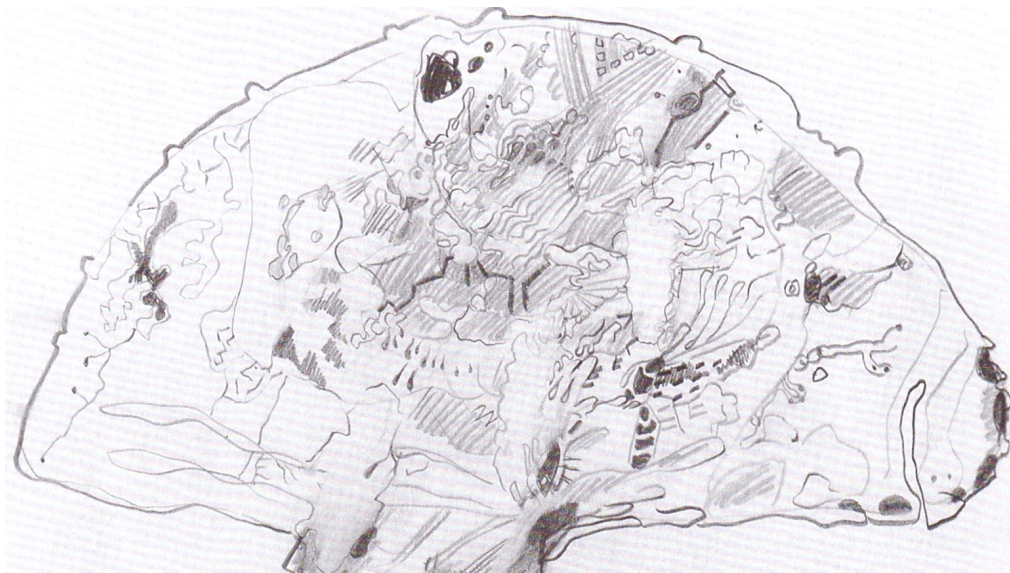


Figure 1.23: RAY CHARLES/SNAKESKIN (1961), assemblage
Courtesy of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

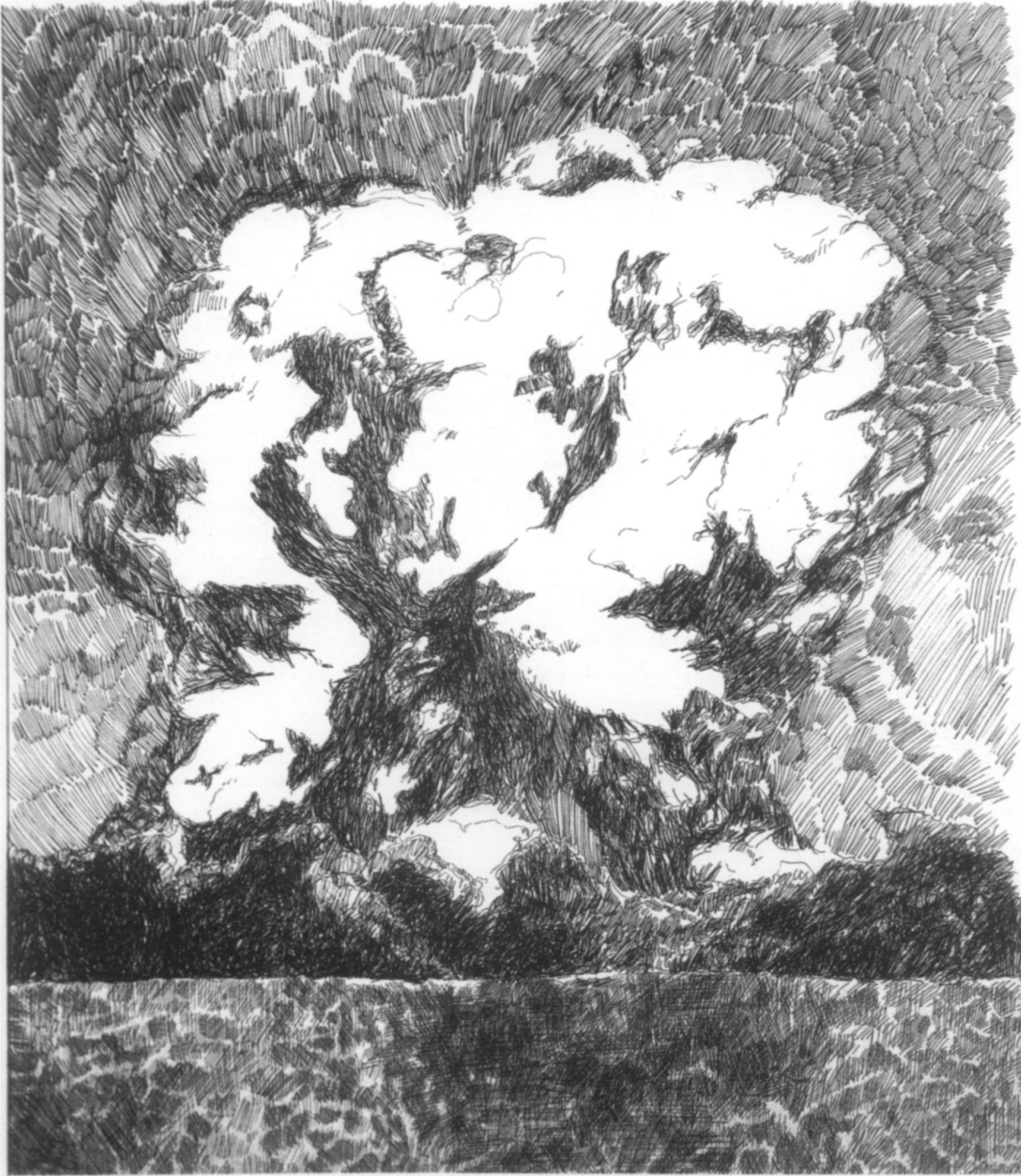
Source: <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/20#ixzz2sm0fNzLx>



Figure 2.1: UNA MAPA (August 26, 1962), drawing (detail)



**Figure 2.2 and 2.3 (detail): MUSHROOM (September 2, 1962), drawing
Courtesy Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles**



**Figure 2.4: MUSHROOM CLOUD (1963), drawing
Courtesy Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles**

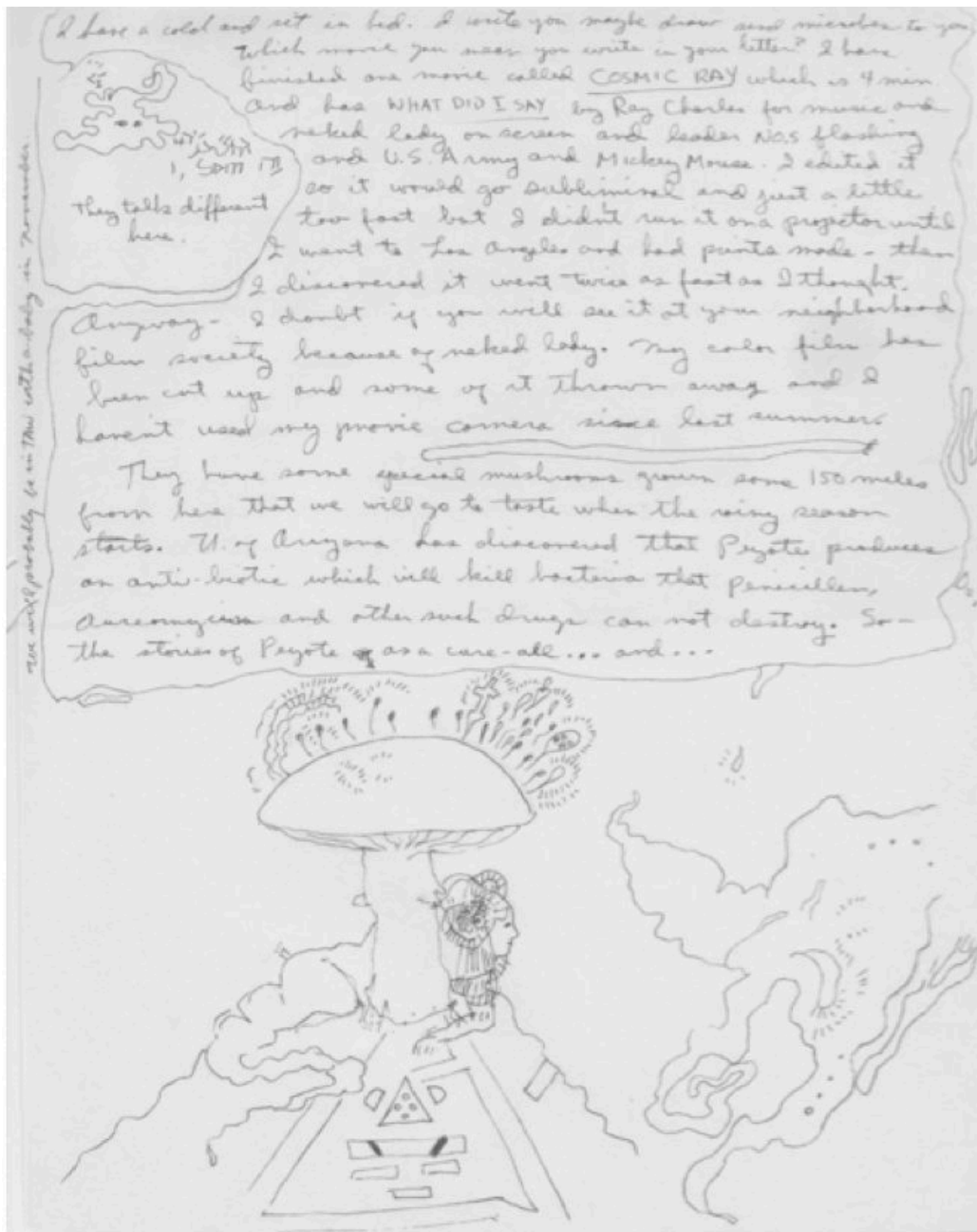


Figure 2.5: Undated letter to Lee Streiff (c. late 1961), The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, BANC MSS 2000/50 c



Figure 2.6: Photo (L to R): Isauro Nava, Yvonne Bond, Steve Leiper, Jean Conner, Beth Pewther, Alan Russo (August 1962). Photographer unknown. The Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, BANC MSS 2000/50 c



Figure 2.7: LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959-1967), 16mm, film strips

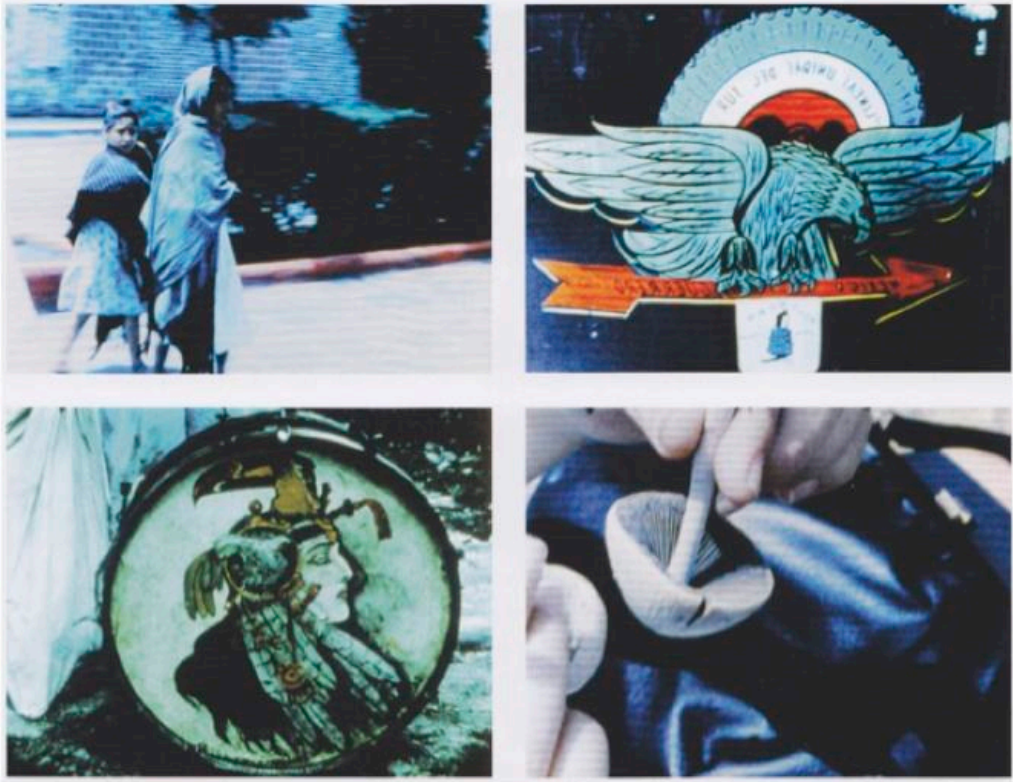


Figure 2.8: LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959-1967), 16mm, film stills



Figure 2.9: LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959-1967), 16mm, film strip

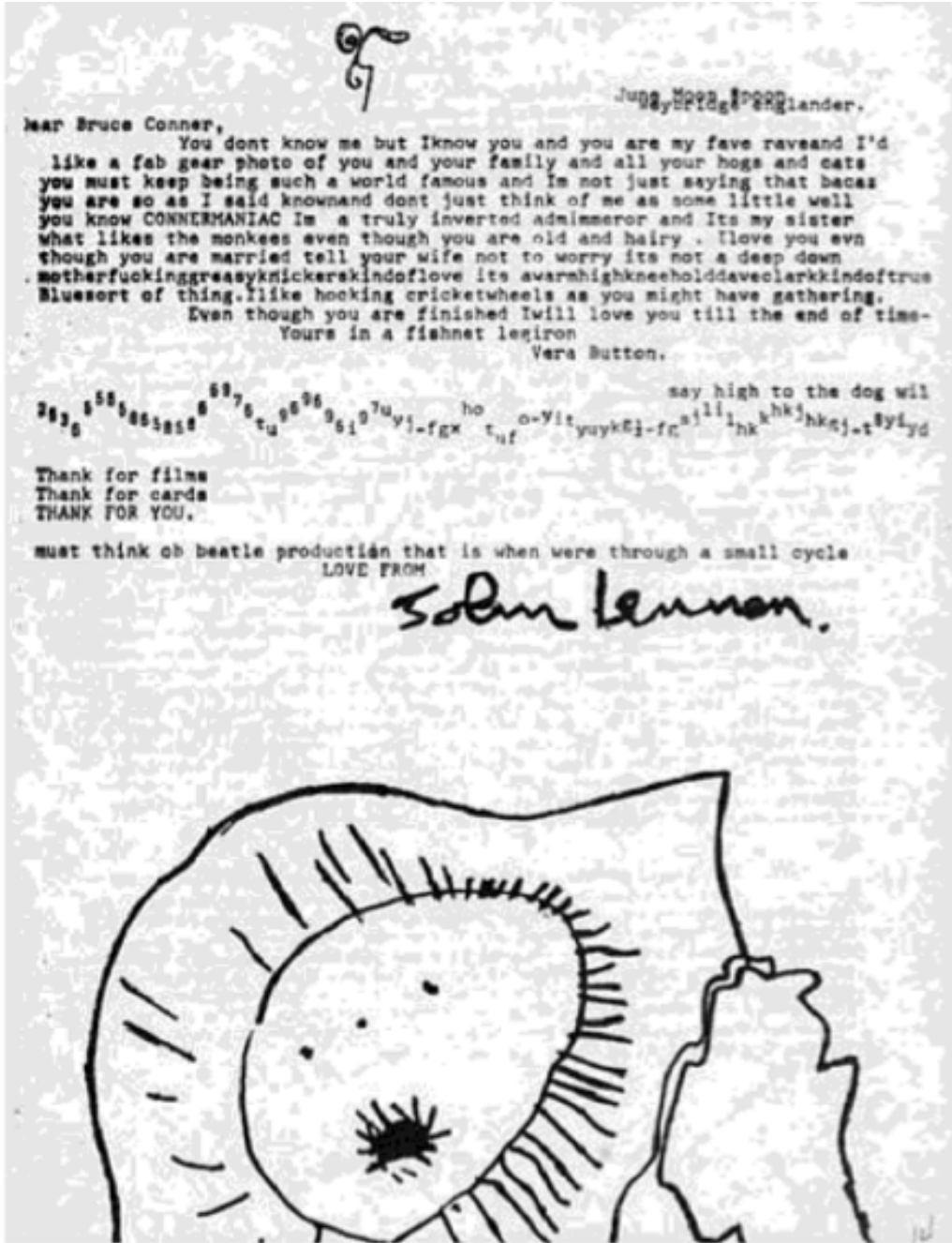
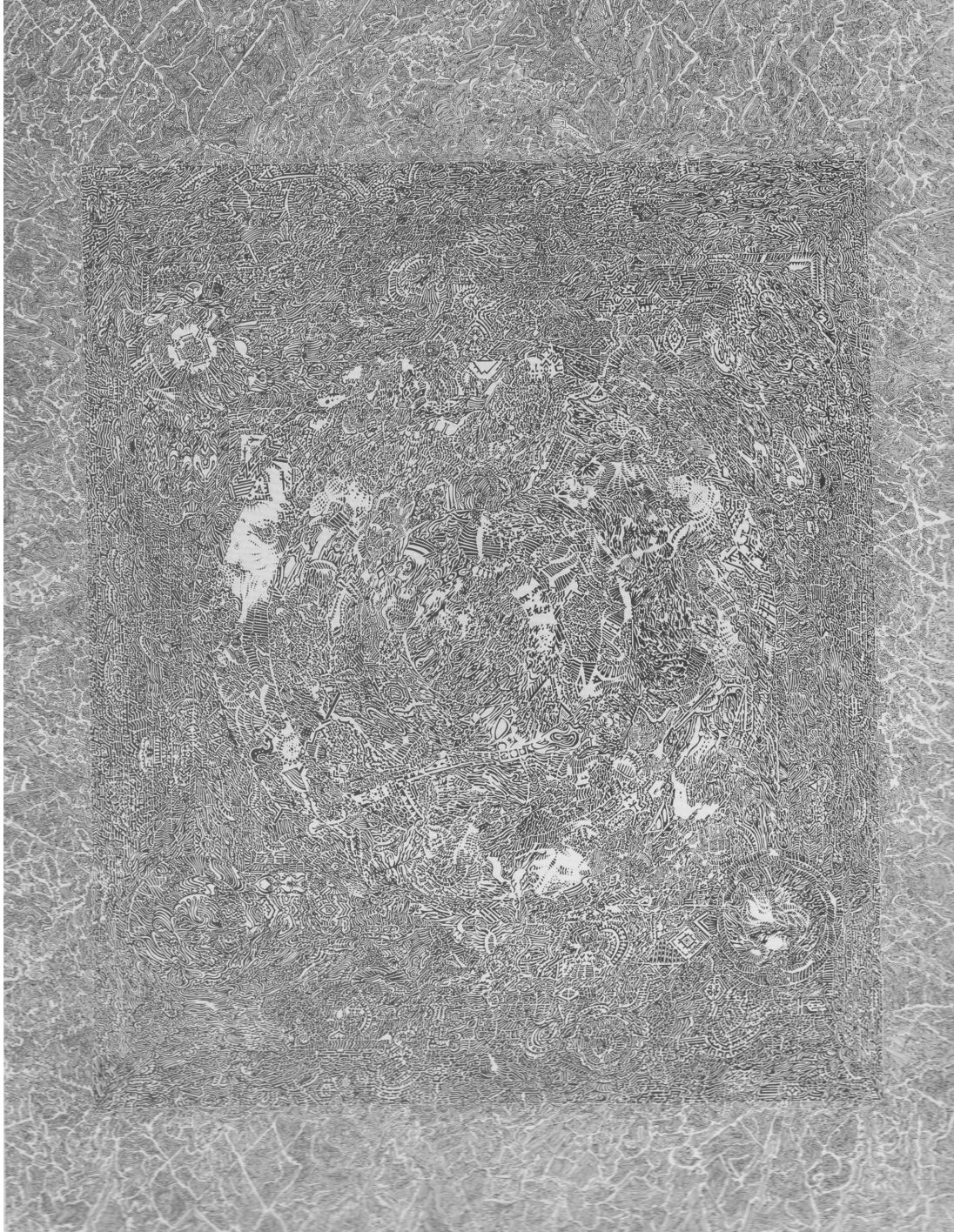
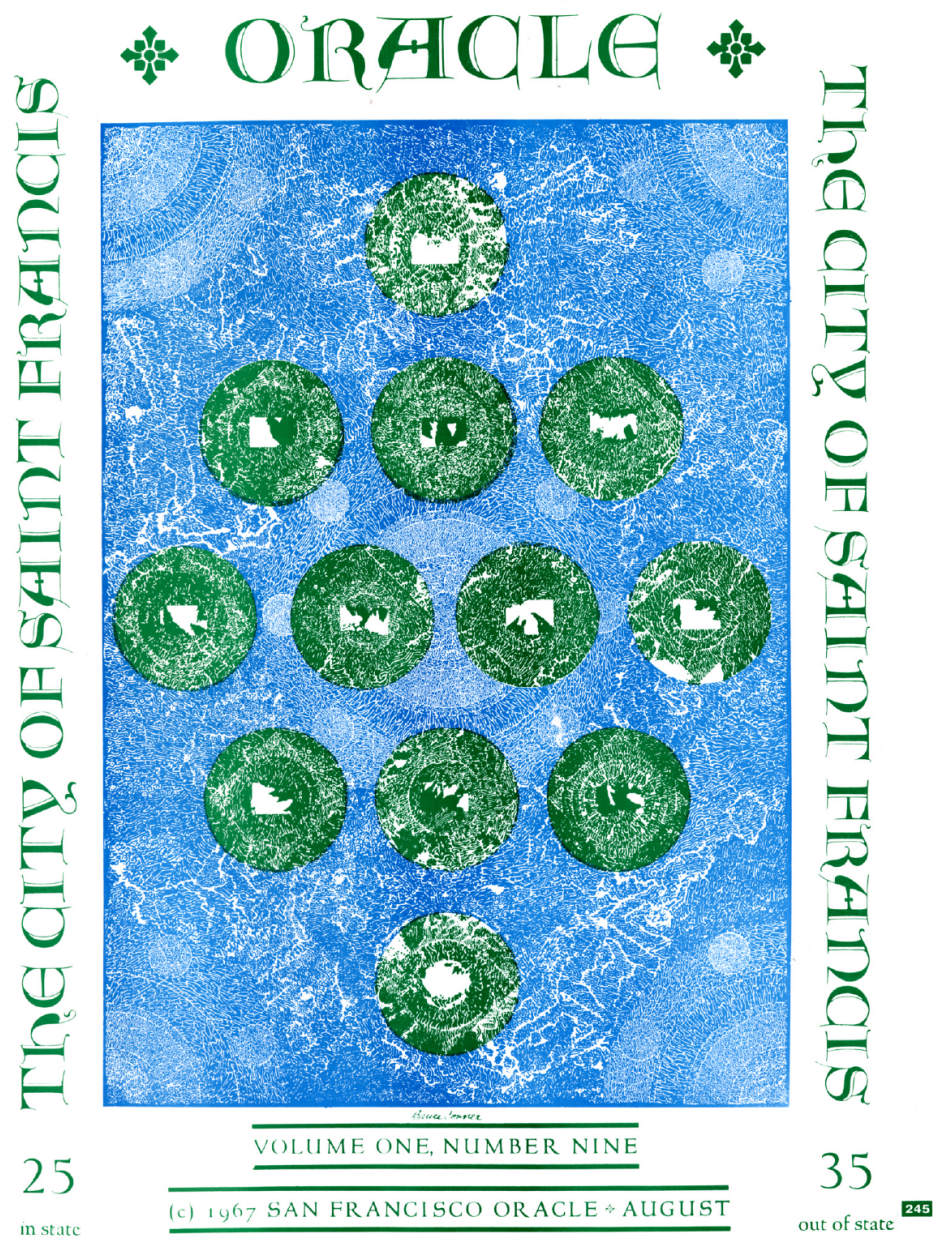


Figure 2.10: John Lennon, Letter to Bruce Conner (1969)
Reprinted in Scott MacDonald's *Canyon Cinema*, 122.



**Figure 2.11: 23 KENWOOD AVE. (1963), drawing
Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York**



**Figure 2.12: Cover illustration for *San Francisco Oracle* (August 1967).
Reproduced in *The Oracle: The Psychedelic Newspaper of the Haight-Ashbury*,
CD-ROM (2005)**



Figure 2.13: Crowd at the San Francisco Trips Festival (January 21, 1966)
Photographer: Gene Anthony

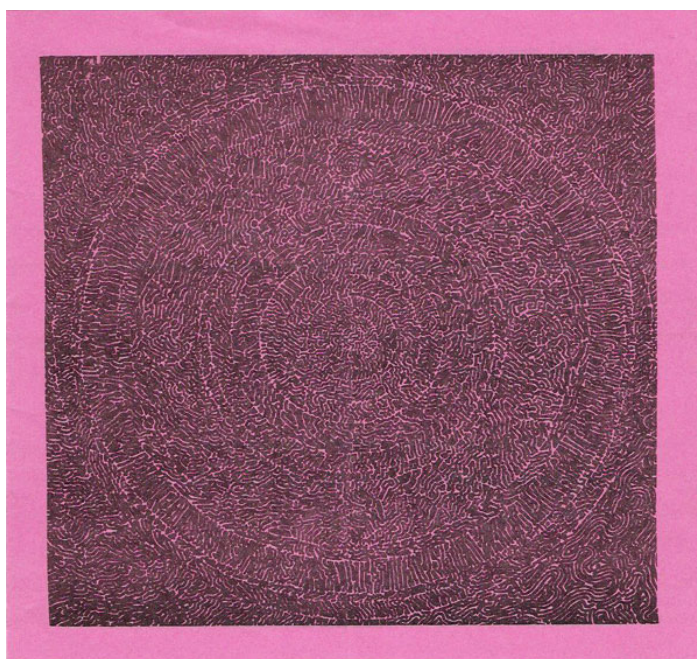


Figure 2.14: San Francisco Trips Festival Program, cover illustration.
Credit: “Mandala by Bruce Conner, courtesy of owner, Michael McClure.”

Participants, beside yourself, are Henry Jacobs
(who first carried out the fantasy of turning on an air dome),
John Korty (illustrious film maker), Gordon Ashby (who
designed the Light Matrix for IBM), Bruce Conner (illustrious
film maker), Ann Halprin & dancers, Pauline Oliveros (with
Elizabeth Harris and the 12-foot light sitar), Chinese
New Years Lion Dancers & Drum and Bugle Corps, the
Stroboscopic Trampoline, The Grateful Dead, Big Brother
and the Holding Company, The Loading Zone, America Needs
Indians, Open Theater, Tape Center, the Merry Pranksters,
and
It's prayer, mostly.

**Figure 2.15: San Francisco Trips Festival Program (detail), participants for Sunday,
January 23, 1966, listing “Bruce Conner (illustrious film maker).”**
Reprinted in Gayle Lemke and Jaceber Kastor, *The Art of the Fillmore, 1966-1971* (Acid
Test Productions, 1997), 26.



Figure 2.16: Ben Van Meter, *S.F. Trips Festival, An Opening* (1966), 16mm, film still



2.17: Poster advertising KQED-TV's "Video Sutra II" (April 1967)



Figure 2.18 Bruce Conner smoking in *The Trip* (Roger Corman, USA, 1966), film still



Figure 2.19-2.20: Bruce Conner does “The Tantrum,” *The Cool Ones* (Gene Nelson, USA, 1967), film still



Fig. 2.21: Crowd dancing with found footage film that resembles A MOVIE.
The Cool Ones (Gene Nelson, USA, 1967), film still



Figure 2.22: Dennis Hopper in LUKE (1967/2005), 8mm/digital, video still



Figure 3.1: BREAKAWAY (1966), 16mm, film still



Figure 3.2: BREAKAWAY (1966), 16mm, film still



**Figure 3.4: Photo of Toni Basil, Bill Wyman, Mick Jagger, and Jack Nitzsche during
The T.A.M.I. Show rehearsals (1964)
Photographer: Steve Binder.**

**Reprinted in Harvey Kubernik, *Hollywood Shack Job: Rock Music in Film and On
Your Screen* (University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 191.**



Figure 3.5: PAS DE TROIS (1964/2005), digital, video still



Figure 3.6: BREAKAWAY (1966), 16mm, film still



Figure 3.7: BREAKAWAY (1966), 16mm, film strip



Figure 3.8: Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *Change of Position* (1911), photograph



Figure 3.9: VIVIAN (1964), 16mm, film still



Figure 3.10: THE WHITE ROSE (1967), 16mm, film still



Figure 4.1: REPORT (1963-1967), 16mm, film strip

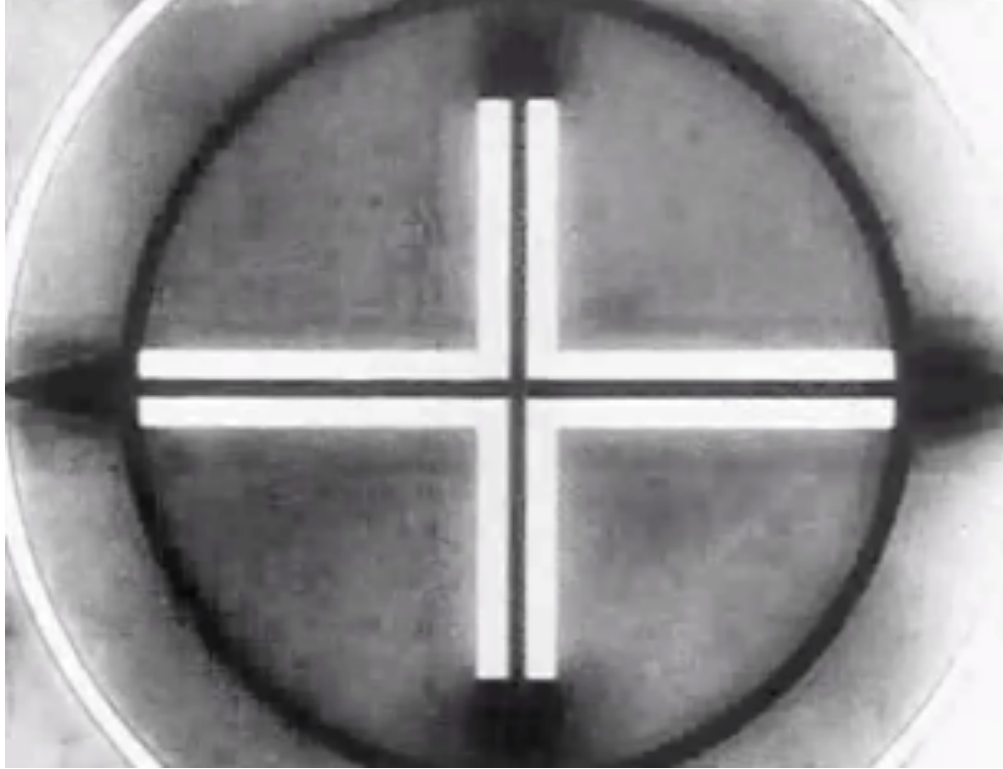


Figure 4.2: Crosshairs in REPORT (1963-1967), 16mm, film still



Figure 4.3: TELEVISION ASSASSINATION (1963-64/1995), 8mm, film stills



Figure 2.4: Ant Farm, *Media Burn* (1975), video still



Figure 4.5: Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco, *The Eternal Frame* (1975), video still



Figure 4.6: MARILYN TIMES FIVE (1968-1973), 16mm, film still

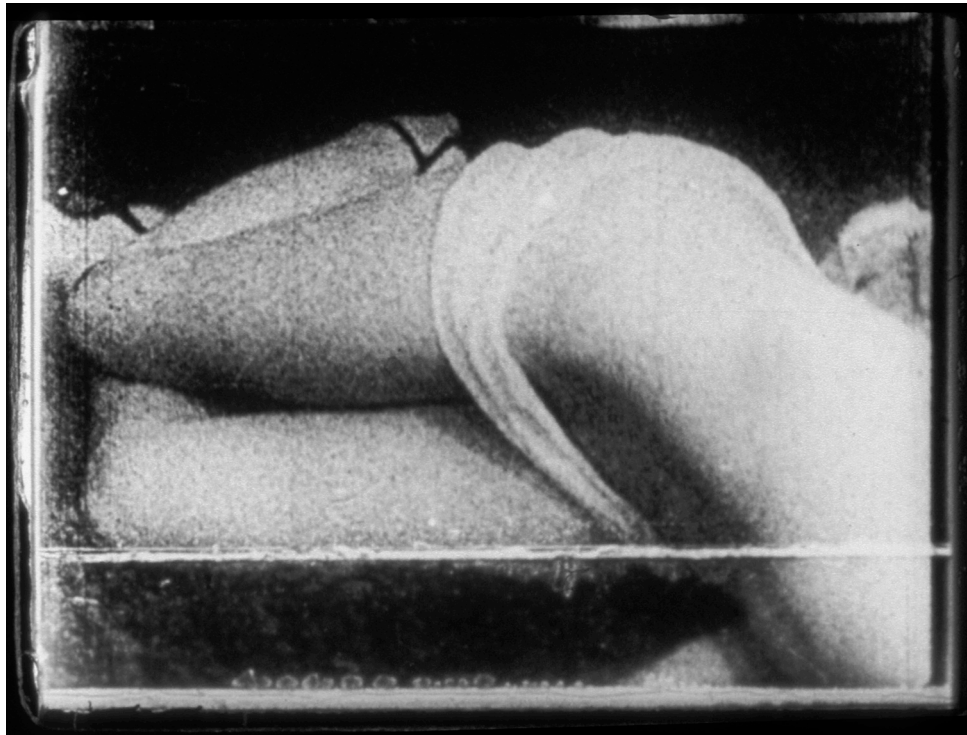


Figure 4.7: Still from MARILYN TIMES FIVE (1968-1973), 16mm, film still



Figures 4.8 and 4.9: Andy Warhol, from the *Marilyns (Reversals Series)* (1979-86), silkscreens



Figure 4.10: Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978-79), video stills



Figure 4.11: CROSSROADS (1976), 35mm, film still



Figure 4.12: CROSSROADS (1976), 35mm, film still



Figure 4.13: Harold E. Edgerton, *Atomic Test Explosion* (n.d.), photograph



Figure 4.14: PERMIAN STRATA (1969), 16mm, film still



Figure 4.15: TAKE THE 5:10 TO DREAMLAND (1977), 16mm, film still



Figure 4.16: VALSE TRISTE (1978), 16mm, film still



Figure 5.1: EASTER MORNING (1966/2008), 8mm/digital, video still