

A MOVIE

By Kevin Hatch

Adapted from "Looking for Bruce Conner"
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Conner's work featured found film and title cards like the one above.

The visual artist Bruce Conner held unorthodox ideas about the possibilities of cinema even before he began making films himself. In 1957, he wrote his gallery in New York with a "suggestion":

New horizons, Unexplored territory. There is a potential patron of The Experimental Film. He hasn't been touched. I don't mean a patron who finances a film. Someone who buys a "print" of a film. People can be found who will purchase experimental films as they would a print or a painting. They have to know that these films can be considered as valid works of art as well as paintings and sculptures and musics and dances etc. This means apart from the mass public phenomena called movies. There are individual artists creating very personal, expressive and intimate works in cinema. Their films are not intended to be seen on the same level, same value system as big production movies. They are creating an individual art form that is best seen in private . . . like a Chinese scroll.¹

Conner soon went about making good on his idea. His initial vision was expansive—to give form to "the tremendous, fantastic movie going in my head made up of all the scenes I'd seen," as he later put it.² Inspired by the dramatic punch he had noted in "Coming Attractions" trailers, his original concept called for a montage of dozens of short clips from old Hollywood movies, placed together without narrative cohesion. (Financial realities meant that the actual footage was taken from considerably less illustrious sources. Most was acquired cheaply at a local camera store, in hundred-foot reels from the sale bin.)³ Conner's first plan for projection went beyond mere screening as well. Drawing on his experience as a sculptor, and presaging the so-called "expanded cinema" movement of the later 1960s, he proposed for the film to be rear-projected as a 16mm loop in a teeming, room-sized installation, an environment that would have included "all kinds of moving objects, strobe lights, random sounds coming off the radio, tape machines, television."⁴ This, too, turned out to be economically unfeasible, leading to the more traditional format of the now landmark found-footage work: a black-and-white film, twelve minutes in length, with sound.

In its finished form, "A MOVIE" (Conner preferred

the title in all caps) consists of footage taken from a variety of sources spliced together, with black leader of different lengths inserted between. Some 180 shots make up the film's twelve minutes, in addition to sections of leader and a number of titles. The film divides roughly into three sections, in accordance with its soundtrack of three of the movements of Ottorino Respighi's sweeping "Pines of Rome" (a middlebrow favorite in the 1950s, bordering on kitsch). Each of the three sections builds on the last, while retaining its own character. The first section seems to offer a premature climax, interleaving a chase scene from a Hopalong Cassidy western with shots of a speeding horse-drawn fire truck, an elephant stampeding, military tanks on the move, a locomotive's spinning wheels, and 1920s- and 1930s-style race cars colliding; the section ends with a spectacular mountainside car crash, capped with a title stating "The End." The action in the longer second section slows down, in line with the more ponderous strains of the second movement of Respighi's symphonic poem, with shots involving slow-moving aerial vehicles and activities, including a blimp, an airplane, and a pair of tightrope walkers performing high above a busy urban street. The third section begins with a long segment of black leader followed by a bewildering array of shots: bombers dropping their payloads; the Hindenburg in flames; a young African girl, shaking and apparently ill; an unexplained execution. The final sequence of the film is cryptic, as it tracks a scuba diver entering the hold of a sunken boat. Black leader follows, with a brief undersea shot of sunlight filtering through water before the film cuts to black for the last time. All of this, again, in just under twelve minutes.

This catalog of actions is necessarily incomplete: the rapid, concussive deployment of shots makes it virtually impossible for the viewer to maintain a grasp on everything that passes before his or her eyes. At moments the film's chases, explosions, and other evocative images hint at a narrative, but they never deliver one. Ultimately, "A MOVIE" is a film that singularly resists verbal description: its sequencing re-

fuses summarization as a story, while its diversity of images confounds any straightforward formal analysis.

Much of this difficulty in description is the result of the specialized manner in which Conner's film was constructed. In a process unique to him, his editing was fundamentally *subtractive*. He described his early filmmaking process in this way: "When I would gather black-and-white film (it might be a newsreel, or a documentary, or commercials, or feature film parts or whatever) what I'd do would be I would run it on a projector, I would run it through a viewer, and I'd start cutting out the parts that I didn't particularly care about."⁵ He would start with a shot and then reduce it again and again, sometimes winding up with nothing at all. His process was a matter of whittling down, rather than building up through the addition of one shot to another. Points of conjunction between shots would slowly emerge during the process, like sediment left after the bulk of narrative sand had washed away.

This approach to editing was of the artist's own design, the idiosyncratic system of an autodidact. In 1958, at the time he made "A MOVIE," the sum total of his filmmaking education had been a one-hour orientation with the experimental filmmaker Lawrence Jordan upon his arrival in San Francisco the year before. His quasi-sculptural filmmaking reflected his background as a visual artist, a maker of objects that were meant to reveal themselves slowly, over time. In a similar spirit, Conner meant for people to live with and return to his films repeatedly, while the films themselves required the viewer to break with the usual patterns of consuming a film. The artist was exceptionally attentive to the individuality of a given viewing; he intended each screening to constitute a unique event. As he told a later interviewer, "I wanted people to have them, to own them, to show them again and again and again. I incorporated elements that would change or create different relationships each time, sort of like playing with happenstance or chance relationships of the I-Ching, Tarot cards, fortune telling. Synchronicity."⁶

Conner's hope for a new class of art patrons collecting 16mm films the way they would sculpture or paintings turned out to be overly optimistic. The market never really materialized, and the film's primary vector of dissemination became the rental market and underground screenings in cities and on college campuses. Nonetheless, formally "A MOVIE" does indeed demand an exceptionally patient mode of viewing, making repetition essential to experiencing the film fully as a work of art. Multiple viewings allow its heterogeneity to begin to cohere into a whole, if an unconventional one. With each viewing, the

rhythm of the editing appears more natural and the shot selection less arbitrary, until the film's logic becomes intuitively evident. With each viewing of the film, one becomes accustomed to the abrupt breaks between shots and more comfortable allowing them to reveal unexpected formal relationships and trigger involuntary mnemonic associations. What at first appears chaotic comes to seem, with repeated viewing, compulsively ordered.

This balance between, on the one hand, an obsessively ordered vision and, on the other, an allowance for the chance connections possible through found-footage montage, results in a film that remains as fresh and challenging today as it was in 1958. The work of a fiercely independent visual artist, "A MOVIE" was the product of an unusual confluence of "high art" and "self-taught" conditions, and the result was something like cinematic sculpture. The finished film has a lapidary quality—one could not add or delete a single frame, it seems—yet it also appears organic, as if it accreted of its own accord, shot by shot, without human intervention. This unique approach to found-footage filmmaking, unprecedented at the time, led to "A MOVIE" becoming formative for multiple generations of artists and experimental filmmakers.

¹ Conner, letter to Charles Alan (April 1957), in Alan Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Ellipses and spelling original.

² Conner, interview with Paul J. Karlstrom (August 12, 1974), Oral History Program, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. David James has called "A MOVIE" an "anatomy of all previous movies." "Allegories of American Cinema: American Film in the Sixties" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 156.

³ The Marx Brothers' 1933 comedy "Duck Soup" was also formative—specifically, the famous moment in which an embattled Groucho Marx's plea for help is answered with a succession of stock shots of rapidly moving vehicles, animals, and armies coming to his aid. See Bruce Jenkins, "Explosion in a Film Factory: The Cinema of Bruce Conner," in "2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story, Part II," ed. Peter Boswell, Joan Rothfuss, and Bruce Jenkins (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1999), p. 188.

⁴ Conner, quoted in Mea Culpa, "Bruce Conner: Part Two," p. 7, cited in *ibid.* Jenkins notes that Conner got the idea for rear projection after a visit to an exhibition on Walt Disney held at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now SFMOMA) in 1958.

⁵ Conner, unpublished interview with Nancy Richards (April 22, 1985), Bruce Conner Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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