

Found Footage Film/Video Descriptions

Report (1967 USA 13 mins) - Bruce Conner

Sound: Extracts from the LP record *Four Days That Shook the World*

Completed over a three-year period, Bruce Conner's *Report* is one of the key works of 1960s avant-garde cinema, a refinement and extension of the filmmaker-artist's film work to that date. In some respects, it is a return to the montage, association and found footage driven preoccupations of his first cinematic opus, the truly seminal and massively influential *A Movie* (1958), and something of a condensation of Conner's key interests in popular culture, mass media, the contemporary power of celebrity, recontextualisation, and the constitutive significance of cataclysmic violence to both the United States and what we might call late modernity. Although enmeshed in the nature of cinema itself, as well as our experience of it (it is in essence both a visceral and intellectual encounter), *Report* equally resonates with Conner's significant work in sculptural assemblage and what would become known as conceptual art. (In fact, Conner made a companion piece to *Report*, the installation and subsequent film work *Television Assassination* [1963-1995] – which used the materiality of the television set as vehicle for projecting TV images of Lee Harvey Oswald's murder.) Initially conceived in the immediate aftermath of Kennedy's murder, *Report* is a deeply felt work, an often lacerating but emotionally draining attempt to deal with John F. Kennedy's death and the ways it was exploited by the mass media, particularly television (in fact, its use of such material as the "cross-hairs" included in countdown leader suggest an even greater level of culpability). It is also, aesthetically, a prescient but undervalued work, prefiguring the structuralist turn in much avant-garde cinema in the late 1960s.

Report is a film that asks for an affective response from its viewer but also requires forensic attention to detail and structure. It is never an easy film to watch. Roughly divided into uneven halves, it relies upon the principles of association, repetition, variation, recognition, and the often-contrapuntal relationship between sound and image to try to capture the "feeling" of the event. Conner's decision to only partially "illustrate" Kennedy's assassination and its aftermath is both pragmatically and intellectually apt. Initially, Conner wanted to make a more conventional and fully-formed documentary on Kennedy's death (how conventional even this film would have ended up being is another matter). Living in Kennedy's birthplace, Brookline, Massachusetts, at the time of his death, Conner originally intended to draw heavily upon television archives and to film the burial he expected to occur in his own neighbourhood (Kennedy was ultimately buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Pennsylvania). The ambitious nature of Conner's project was partly driven by the Ford Foundation Grant he had received (one of ten given to experimental filmmakers in 1964), but was also an outcome of an uncommon obsession (though perhaps quite common at the time) with the assassination. In this regard, *Report* can be considered as something of a mourning work, an attempt to deal with *and* actually register Kennedy's death (an aspect that Conner builds into the form and structure of the film itself). This aspect is supported by Conner's own comments about the film and his reluctance to complete and finalise it:

The problem in making the film was that 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. If the film was

completed then he was as dead as they had made him and so it took me 2½ years to finish the film. [\(1\)](#)

Report was actually shown in eight different versions – all of equal duration and with the same soundtrack – after its initial premiere at the Harvard Film Society in 1964. The final version – after which the previous iterations were destroyed, if they hadn't already been obliterated in the process of revision – was not completed until 1967. The trauma that Conner was investigating and struggling to represent and communicate plainly touched a cord with the film's initial audiences as is indicated in many of Conner's comments on these screenings. Ultimately, the long gestation of *Report* is another indicator of the "death work" that Conner was undertaking, an attempt to hold onto the memory and image of Kennedy but also to mourn his loss. Despite the fact that the film, particularly in its second half, provides a fairly lacerating and unforgiving critique of the commercialisation of Kennedy's presidency, and of American culture more generally, it also speaks of and provides witness to the genuine trauma that the events of Kennedy's death provoked.

Report can be regarded as a pre-eminent example of what is sometimes called "Kennedy Death Art" [\(2\)](#), a series of films, paintings, books, sculptures, etc. that attempt to come to terms with, represent and at times critique the national trauma of the President's assassination. These works also speak to the insatiable fascination of the public and media for information about this event. The most famous (and contested) of these representations is also the most unadorned, Abraham Zapruder's brief home movie that actually (and possibly uniquely) registers the point of Kennedy's death. But even this endlessly analysed and contested footage pinpoints the failure of representational media to fully reveal and provide evidence of events. This difficulty of representation and providing irrefutable evidence is also articulated in a film such as Oliver Stone's hyperbolic *JFK* (1991). In Stone's film, this is largely achieved through the deployment of images from across a bewildering range of formats and sources, including the repeatedly inserted images of Zapruder's film. *Report* itself actually speaks to the necessary absence of images rather than their confusing abundance. Although the Zapruder film was public knowledge in the years immediately following Kennedy's death, it was embargoed and only released as a series of still frames that were published by *LIFE* magazine in 1964 (and subsequently screened during the trial of Clay Shaw in 1969). It was not until it was aired on television by *Goodnight America* (hosted by Geraldo Rivera) in 1975 that it truly became part of the public consciousness. The absence of these images in Conner's film is both structurally and emotionally significant, and a key sign of its status as an historical artefact (for contemporary audiences, at least).

Report responds to these gaps in knowledge and representation by working these elements into the film itself (so the film includes advertisements and has something of the feeling of a discontinuous live broadcast). Conner is attempting to make his audience think and feel, but in a complex and sometimes contradictory fashion, about the events and meaning of Kennedy's death (and how they experienced it as a mediated event). Ultimately, I think the film gains strength by making us question how such events can and can't be illustrated and represented. The trauma and chaos of the moment of the assassination is "illustrated" by the flickering alternation of black-and-white frames, creating what is commonly known as a "flicker film". Conner "represents" this failure of comprehension as a trauma to the film itself, a breaking down of conventional and

straightforwardly illustrative representation. This section has been discussed as an attempt to simulate the fluctuating consciousness of the dying Kennedy, but its affect is actually more primal than this and acts to communicate the limits of representation (particularly in relation to death).

When discussing this opening section, Conner has stated that “there’s no real film there” (3), but I think he is being deliberately disingenuous when making such comments. In fact, “film” or filmmaking is “all” that there is in this opening section, a brute fact that we are constantly made aware of. (In this respect, *Report* also resonates closely with the work of the great Cuban agitprop documentarist, Santiago Alvarez.) But this “flicker” technique is also deeply hypnotic, foreshadowing Conner’s experimentation with lightshow projections at rock concerts later in the 1960s (though by the time of the film’s completion these were contemporaneous aspects of Conner’s practice). As a result, *Report* emerges as a truly physically engaged film in which we feel and register every technique, choice and counterpoint. Unlike many found footage films, its choice of images and sounds is very precise, much more “chosen” or “selected” than “found”. This is even true of the rapidly accelerated montage of associational images and sounds that define the film’s second half, a cornucopia of connected and disconnected footage that nevertheless adds to the lexicon of images that can be used to represent the Kennedy phenomenon (while also simulating the distracted and disconnected flow of program and advertising content that drives commercial television). For example, the brief footage we see of a nuclear test reminds the viewer of the near cataclysm of the Cuban Missile Crisis. As in many of Conner’s films, this set of connections and contrasts is both humorous *and* deeply disturbing. Spectator’s who self-consciously catch themselves chuckling at the juxtaposition of a phrase and image (for example, the voiceover announcing that the ambulance “doors fly open” while we watch the doors of a refrigerator magically part) are recognising the contradictory and deeply troubling techniques that Conner is simulating and making us aware of. This shift from the stark minimalism of the first section to the illustrative abundance of the second, demonstrates the tonal range and precision of Conner’s groundbreaking and peerless work in found footage.

Nevertheless, I fear that my analysis and description of the film may have made it sound overly abstract. It is true that the first “half” of the film actually relies upon few individual shots or even recognisable representational images, but this does not mean that the image track does not “illustrate” what we hear on the soundtrack. In some respects, the contrast between what we hear and see, and the failure of the images to directly represent the nature of events, is staged as a contrast between radio and television. Conner uses excerpts from a record of radio broadcasts of the day of the assassination and its aftermath. Although he has chosen sections of these broadcasts that reflect the chaotic “realisation” and communication of information and passage of events, this soundtrack still grants the film a narrative framework. Conner’s decision to split this soundtrack temporally, and return to the events proceeding the assassination in the second half (from the point when Kennedy arrives in Dallas), acts to make strange what we hear but also recognises the portent and foreknowledge that almost every spectator brings to the film (then *and* now). So the film also asks how it is possible to provide a truly fresh perspective on or approach to such an over-determined and represented event. This aspect is reinforced by the images that Conner uses (and those he doesn’t). In many ways the most challenging aspect of *Report* is its attempt to represent Kennedy’s death abstractly by playing with audience expectations and challenging them to fill in the gaps. The deathly nature of the cinematic image is evoked by

Conner's use of repetition, reversal and the manipulation of the forward and backward motion of film. In *Report*'s earlier sections it can seem as if we are watching the film on a Steenbeck editing table, privy to the manipulations of the celluloid as it is melded into a more recognisable (and possibly more palatable) form. This section of the film relies upon a "failure" of representation, an aspect that cinema and the mass media routinely try to cover up (the radio broadcast we hear also tries to do this). In this respect, *Report* also exemplifies the socio-political intent that Michael Atkinson sees as inherent to found footage cinema: "At the core of the found footage aesthetic lies a malcontented urge to uncover the dark submovie – a true 'secret cinema' – underneath the skin of generic mainstream media" (4).

As in *A Movie*, Conner both celebrates narrative cinema and self-consciously deconstructs it, showing and revealing the formal apparatus that supports most commercial cinema and mass media. This is most evident in the early sections of *Report*. The initial, and self-consciously duped footage of the President's motorcade is looped, rocking backwards and forwards and only gradually proceeding in time. This technique speaks of a forlorn hope of stopping or reversing time, showing representation as something quite distinct from reality, while constantly reminding us of the events that will soon follow. Part of the reason why Conner utilises a kind of flashback on the soundtrack, is that the whole film relies on a sense of retrospection. It is a very physical and kinaesthetically engaging film, but this physical response is as much produced by memory as the physical and perceptual shocks of the film and filmmaking itself. And in the end, Conner's great contribution is to profoundly join together a clinical but delirious preoccupation with formal structure and the nature of the cinema with broader questions and conceptions of what constitutes the nature of late modernity and even subjectivity.

Endnotes

1. "Bruce Conner Interview", *Film Comment* vol. 5, no. 4, Winter 1969, p. 18. ↑
2. See Mitch Tuchman, "Kennedy Death Films", *Take One* vol. 6, no. 6, May 1978, pp. 18-22. ↑
3. "Bruce Conner Interview", p. 18. ↑
4. Michael Atkinson, "Collective Preconscious", *Film Comment* vol. 29, no. 6, November-December 1993, p. 83. ↑

Outer Space - [Peter Tscherkassky](#)

Austria / 1999

10 min.

A premonition of a horror film, lurking danger: A house – at night, slightly tilted in the camera's view, eerily lit – surfaces from the pitch black, then sinks back into it again. A young woman begins to move slowly towards the building. She enters it. The film cuts crackle, the sound track grates, suppressed, smothered. Found footage from Hollywood forms the basis for the film. The figure who creeps through the images, who is thrown around by them and who attacks them is Barbara Hershey. Tscherkassky's dramatic frame by frame re-cycling, re-copying and new exposure of the material, folds the images and the rooms into each other. It removes the ground from under the viewer's feet and splits faces, like in a bad dream.

From the off, from outer space, foreign bodies penetrate the images and cause the montage to become panic stricken. The outer edges of the film image, the empty perforations and the skeletons of the optical sound track rehearse an invasion. They puncture the anyway indeterminate action of the film. Cinema tearing itself apart, driven by the expectation of a final ecstasy. Glass walls explode, furniture topples over. Tscherkassky puts his heroine under pressure, drives her to extremes. Time and time again she appears to hit out against the cinematic apparatus, until the images begin to stutter, are thrown off track. **Outer Space** is a shocker of cinematographic dysfunction; a hell-raiser of avant-garde cinema. It conjures up an inferno which pursues the destruction (of cinematic narrative and illusion) with unimaginable beauty. (*Stefan Grisse mann*)

Mirror Mechanics - [Siegfried A. Fruhauf](#)

Austria / 2005

7 min.

The film as a mirror and, as a further consequence, the phenomenon of identification primarily inherent in feature films, condense to a type of essence of film's potential. This film reports on cinema and the processes within it. In doing so, it doesn't reveal any secrets, but instead, attempts to transfer – in the sense of seeing what we see – what we do in the cinema and what also can be relevant outside of film into a visually stimulating and captivating event. (Siegfried A. Fruhauf)

The mirror is an instrument of deception. It can never correspond with the images presented to it, although it can reverse them, twist them into their antitheses: into counter images. It is no wonder that right from the start, the mirror has been one of the favorite accessories of melodramatic and avant-garde cinema. The mirror image's imaginary lack of physical body sums up the idea of the cinematic: illusion, shadow, projection.

In *Mirror Mechanics*, a young woman with wet hair glances in a bathroom mirror. She wipes across the surface with a brush of the hand: the picture that shows this scene is mirrored along the center axis, alienated in a type of double projection. That is the starting point: Siegfried A. Fruhauf subjects his material to a series of complex transformations, overlapping and intertwining variously processed image layers, double reflections, and multiple exposures.

Jürgen Gruber's subtle soundtrack composed from intimated guitar feedback and electronic sound details gives the film an aura of smoldering aggression: the foundations of a thriller. The final and most decisive reflection in *Mirror Mechanics* finally leads from the inside to the outside: toward gently rippling surfaces of water and a return to perfect symmetry, to a scene at the beach, in the scratched film reflection, an anonymous young woman with wet hair.

(Stefan Grisseemann)

Translation: Lisa Rosenblatt

The Hills are Alive (2005, USA 7.5min) - Gregg Biermann

An iconic scene from the beloved Hollywood musical *The Sound of Music* is transformed through a contrapuntal progression of split screen effects. The resulting mosaic reveals haunting melodies and reverberating dissonance.

My work comes out of the avant-garde tradition of film as visual art. Avant-garde cinema is an important and relatively young artistic project. While it maintains its scrappy integrity, and while many significant works have been created in subsequent decades, current practitioners have not fully moved out of the shadow of the prodigious 1960's and 70's. The development of new tools has often determined aesthetic innovations. Consequently, I've looked to new technologies to discover vast unspoiled frontiers no longer available to small gauge filmmakers interested in exploring cinematic form. Most of these works could not have been achieved in earlier periods and are deeply rooted in digital technology. The meaning of digital technology lies in its ability to copy, alter, mask, fragment, super-impose, mutate, reflect, transmit and reframe.

Happy Again (2006, USA 5 min) - Gregg Biermann

The signature scene from the Hollywood musical *Singin' in the Rain* is split into seven layers. Each layer is moving at a different speed and is visible equally in superimposition. At the temporally central point all visual and audio elements coalesce in a single frame. The result uncovers a new cinema, music and dance that are buried within the familiar iconic sequence.

Another Picture (2007, USA 4 min) - Gregg Biermann

Another Picture is a digital age motion study inspired by the "chronophotographic" work of Etienne-Jules Marey. The finale from the Hollywood classic *Sunset Boulevard* is split into 16 superimposed layers. Each duplicate of the scene dissolves in and out such that it is slightly offset in time from the next. The result is oddly static and hyperactive at the same time.