

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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Bruce Conner / Thomas Dane, London



I arrived in the middle. Or maybe it was the beginning. Or, maybe it was the end. Bruce Conner's 1958 film, *A Movie*, screened at Thomas Dane Gallery is not a film that rewards or penalises the viewer for respecting linearity. The film is made up of short clips of found footage — a phrase that now thunders with cliché to the degree that it is nearly impossible to understand how radical the use of assemblage would have appeared to an audience in the late 1950s. Warhol's great early films were half a decade away when *A Movie* was created, and Conner's work lacks the self-consciously auteurish quality of Andy's creation of movie stars and personae, but a kind of kinship can be found as well. Conner, too, is interested in the ways in which emotions are summoned but also created by moving images. The question of whether such subjective states are "real" or at least "genuine" is as much at the heart of Conner's film as the question of how such emotions were generated or performed was to Warhol's later works. Thus, seeing *A Movie* more than sixty years after it was created was a surprisingly immediate experience.

When I sat down in the gallery, making my way through the curtain that separated the gallery's front office from the makeshift cinema of the screening room, the first images I saw were of a procession of apparently indigenous people bearing massive structures carefully on their heads as they walked. The images were quickly replaced by shots of buildings and nonchalant tightrope walkers navigating tenuously between skyscrapers. Though both images were ostensibly celebratory in tone, not least with the booming, almost histrionic soundtrack of Ottorino Respighi's "Pines of Rome" blasting in accompaniment, but perhaps the passage of time has made them even more emotionally rich and added an undertone of the melancholic. The capacity of the endless flow of images in the internet age to 'flatten' time and emotional responses means that even the most intensely evocative images are quickly assimilated and banalised. The expectations of the cinema audience of Conner's time can feel as distant as the events in the clips themselves. In the case of the indigenous peoples featured beside the white urban daredevils, such a rough juxtaposition necessarily raises the spectre of cultural appropriation and exoticisation. No doubt, appropriation is literally the form of the work itself, but Conner's embrace of the bombast and grandiosity entails a criticality that seems to have only grown with time.

It is difficult to know how such juxtapositions would have been received in the America of Dwight Eisenhower, perhaps the technical or narrative dimension of them might have been of greatest interest to a 1950s avant garde audience, but in the 21st century, the occupants of the images and the attitudes they express inscribe a kind of metanarrative into *A Movie*: precarity and life itself is something to play with for empowered metropolitans, for the

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distant peripherals in their pre-“modern” cultures, rituals have higher stakes than mere amusement. It seems almost superfluous to say that *A Movie* is in no way a light work, images of horrifying road accidents, the Hindenburg disaster and warfare complete with all-encompassing mushroom clouds are scattered throughout its twelve minutes with a profligacy that stops just short of exploitative, nevertheless, it is a work that describes much more than cruelty and futility. It is a study of the ways in which the living image makes demands of viewers and the ways in which such images, in their very immediacy and veracity, can deceive. Pictures don't like, Conner seems to be arguing with *A Movie*, but in the right hands, even the bare facts can have equivocal meanings.

Bruce Conner
A Movie, 1958
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Image: *A MOVIE* by Bruce Conner, 1958. Image courtesy The Conner Family Trust, Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.

<http://www.samizdatonline.ro/bruce-conner-thomas-dane-london/>