

## Document Citation

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## film

Canyon Cinema and SF Cinematheque founder Bruce Baillie's *Here I Am* (left) intuitively weaves sound and image in its exploration of an Oakland school for special-needs students. In *On Sundays* (center and right), Baillie's images of faces and fog result in one of the greatest portraits of San Francisco on celluloid. No wonder Apichatpong Weerasethakul worships him.



## Light and fog

Bruce Baillie's peerless lyrical visions of San Francisco return home

By Max Goldberg  
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Not so very long ago, the critic Anthony Bannon wrote, "More than any other American independent film artist, Bruce Baillie's use of light suits the metaphors given to the word." If the comment sounds like hyperbole, only a few minutes with Baillie's work — minutes that will surely prove both unmooring and exhilarating — will make one understand why this hero of the avant-garde inspires such fervor. It's often remarked that artists aren't sufficiently appreciated in their homeland, but Baillie's relative anonymity seems especially ignominious (and unfortunately all too typical of a widespread indifference toward experimental film). A fundamental figure of American avant-garde cinema in ways both artistic (as the visionary creator of six films on the Anthology Film Archive's "Essential Cinema" list) and historical (as founder of the collective and archive Canyon Cinema), Baillie belongs on the short list of

San Francisco's most significant creators. As if to prove the point, SF Cinematheque is screening a half dozen of Baillie's early films (made from 1961 to 1966), all set in the Bay Area, each a small masterpiece of light and motion.

The films being shown at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts were all made while Baillie was a decidedly local artist producing autonomous works (his mature debut, *On Sundays*, and the more heralded *Mass for the Dakota Sioux*) as well as documentary shorts for Canyon's CinemaNews unit (*Mr. Hayashi*, *Termination*, *Here I Am*, *The Gymnasts*). The concept of avant-garde newsreels is pretty irresistible, but in truth the distinction between the two categories seems negligible 40 years later. It's all vintage Baillie, though *On Sundays* and *Mass for the Dakota Sioux* both benefit from having been labored over more than the shorts. Cinematheque's program conveys this work as being not just unmistakably Baillie but also breathtakingly of San Francisco:

city symphonies of light and fog, overlapping environs, the sea and the street. Many have tried to capture ineffable San Francisco (the Golden Gate Bridge is, after all, the most photographed structure in America), but precious few have so freely sculpted with its elements, evoking its essential sleepiness, its strange restlessness. Local filmgoers won't be stunned by what they see so much as how they see it — the virtuosic superimpositions of *Mass for the Dakota Sioux*, the elliptical, transient narrative of *On Sundays*, and the many luminescent, Yasujiro Ozu-like images of faces and fog evoking this city at land's end.

Of course, one need not be a San Franciscan to appreciate Baillie's work as, indeed, his tactile approach to film form makes for some of the purest cinematic pleasure this side of the Lumière brothers. In *Mr. Hayashi*, a Japanese immigrant walks through hills made dreamlike by shape-shifting fog; in *Here I Am*, as in Baillie's best-known work, *Castro Street*, the filmmaker intuitively weaves sound and image to suggest a sense of place (in this case, an Oakland school for special-needs students); in *Mass for the Dakota Sioux*, a political elegy of displacement is invoked by rocking compositions that don't frame so

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### BREAKFAST WITH DR. BISH

This weekend brings a major event: the rare return of Bruce Baillie — whose visions of San Francisco are just as brilliant and uncanny, if not as famous, as Alfred Hitchcock's — to a movie screen in the city. Contemporary filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul, the director making the most revelatory commercial features today, cites Baillie as his favorite experimental filmmaker. Though Baillie primarily made short films, the philosophical rivers of beauty that run between their works are deep. The moment seemed more than right for a conversation between Baillie and filmmaker Michelle Silva, who helps run Canyon Cinema, one of the two organizations (along with SF Cinematheque) that Baillie founded. They got on the phone and let the tape roll.

**SFBG** *We're recording.*

**BRUCE BAILLIE** How do they say that in the industry?

**SFBG** *"For quality assurance, we're recording this conversation."*

**BB** Well, for the recorder's sake, I might be mumbling a little, because I'm still eating my second bowl of cereal. It's the famous Dr. Bish's elixir, which all filmmakers require.

**SFBG** *You've built a monumental body of cinema now housed in our Library of Congress. You've also founded two distinguished organizations, the avant-garde film distributor Canyon Cinema and the experimental film and video exhibitor San Francisco Cinematheque, which both began in your own backyard over 40 years ago. At the beginning, did you have any forethought about the significance of your work and the movement you would initiate?*

**BB** To give a generic response, probably not. People don't operate that way generally. Adolf Hitler probably had a pretty grand idea at the beginning, but it was ill founded.

Theater was always one of the bases. I was very taken by Balinese theater and Noh theater. Also [Jean] Cocteau's admonishments that all theater must arise from local familiarity. We had all those ingredients there, almost like baking bread, and it did arise very nicely and warmly and simply. We had a theater in the woods with the neighbors coming over and putting up park benches. There was a big old willow tree by our house and conveniently, a hill behind that held the big surplus screen nicely.

I always say to myself, "What is theater made of?" and it really is any collage collection of sticks and stones. It can be highly technical or it can be

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# Baillie CONT.,,

much as flow. It's tempting to see Baillie's work as an extension of the French impressionists' of the '20s (whose emphasis on cinematographic effects and the ineffable helped first delineate avant-garde cinema), but it feels ridiculous to play this game with a filmmaker so wholly distinctive.

Almost as ridiculous, that is, as trying to put his films into words.

My own first contact with Baillie's work came in an experimental film seminar (we watched his ravishing short *Valentin de las Sierras*). The class had spent weeks struggling through mathematically formalistic work by filmmakers like Peter Kubelka — then all of a sudden, this: a film that couldn't be analyzed as if it were an equation, a film that demanded to be seen and felt before it could be understood. For those who admire lyrical cinema, there can be no higher praise. **SFBG**

## EARLY BAILLIE AND THE CANYON CINEMANEWS YEARS

With Bruce Baillie in person  
Sun/15, 7:30 p.m.  
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts  
701 Mission, SF  
(415) 978-2787  
www.ybca.org  
www.sfcinematheque.org

## BREAKFAST WITH DR. BISH

CONT.,,

like the charred bones and the fire out in the desert of Mongolia. If it's done with that kind of ancient mind-set, that kind of respect and adulation of the content — and also the Irish tradition of the manner of presentation — then you're all right. It could be under the apple tree that I'm looking at now while we speak.

I'm not too worried about all the modern stuff, aside from the problem of the way semiconscious people identify with the mere technology of it and become two-dimensional. Then you don't have theater, you have President Bush at Harvard taking business administration.

**SFBG** *When I watch your films, such as Here I Am, the tightly framed faces reveal unconventional beauty. Could you talk about the people who do appear in your films?*

**BB** I will try ... I'm going to have to wash the Bishery off my teeth. The only trouble with the Bish formula at breakfast is that it not only gives you thick ankles eventually if you keep eating it, but it's also hard on the dentures or teeth. We don't like to admit it on the labels. We have a big business shipping this stuff out of the house in a dehydrated form to all the filmmakers in the world. Especially in Asia, it's very popular.

We sent a batch to South Korea for a festival. I just got their booklet back, from a Dr. Kim. I didn't realize she was such an esteemed colleague of the doctor here. Apparently the huge batch of dehydrated Bishery was rejected by most of the younger people there, who prefer their own diet, so they sent it up to North Korea. I don't know what's going to come of that. I might be able to save us from the bombs and everything they're trying to throw over here.

Anyway, *avante*, as my old friend would say — on to the question. There's all kinds of references in our literature, especially, I suppose, in the holy works like the Gita and the writings of the Buddha, which run across the idea of direct perception. Just seeing. Or in the Bible, the Old Testament. Or the Tibetan teachings for the acolytes who were becoming monks and priests — they used to sit up above the road, maybe one at a time, and observe the faces coming up from the world below.

For some reason, when most people take a camera in hand and click on a face, all they get is a two-dimensional representation. I don't see why I'd wanna be satisfied by that. When you photograph, you photograph what is, not what is merely apparent or not. That's the assignment, really, and it's not completed and shouldn't be exceptional.

**SFBG** *The spiritualism in your films, like Mass of the Dakota Sioux, Tung, and On Sundays, seems to be combined with a little bit of disdain for modern civilization. There's that mixture.*

**BB** Well, there's what Jesus called hatred of the world — which is something one might be able to teach his or herself along the way, to give up all the appearances and become one with the continuity of life flow itself. That's a whole

process. Some people, like myself, are born with a disdain, yes, for the world in that other sense. For example, my totem animal is a wolf, and I've never liked my neighbors. That's a horrible thing, but I was born with that in my portfolio and I work with that every day.

Some people really are very fond of going to the supermarket and the malls and are able to behave themselves when they're buying a pair of shoes. Actually, whether they believe in it all or not doesn't seem to come into any question, and overall it's quite wonderful that they're able to be not only very kind but loving with all of these comings and goings. To me, going to the aerodrome to pick up the Alaska Air number 387 is the most frightening kind of experience that anyone could have devised in purgatory.

In my own case, since you're asking me, this person, not someone else, about the images they project, the images are contaminated with not only a great universal love but at the same moment a great hatred for the goings on of worldly affairs and events and shapes and forms. So as I get into nature I find it less contaminated by man's touch, but it's also frightening in its own way, of course, with all the monsters at the edge of the world that are ready to devour you when you're out on your sailboat in the Atlantic. And the tigers in the night and the ragings of the great beasts.

**SFBG** *In your work there will sometimes be a shot where the subject is the mist or the fog. Those two aspects cut together create a tension that has an emotional effect. How would you say your palette developed and matured over time?*

**BB** I lived my life with the camera and I deliberately took on nothing else. No family, which is the main thing one gives up to live that kind of life, and I lived en route, always on the move. Living in my car, just seeing and trying my best to get it through that little eyepiece, that little Bolex viewfinder — the first version, which was half the size of the later version. I can't see through it anymore, it's so small.

There's no reason at all to settle for anything less than a grand attempt at bringing back from the unknown what is there. The *what is* of this. Part of it can kind of humorously involve a practice that I used to throw out when I was teaching, that is, to learn to become invisible. I would line all my students up and say, "OK, everybody close their eyes," and then I would run around the corner [*laughs*] and disappear.

We'd go into it a little further, where I'd say, "What I really meant was we have to learn not to use the camera, just the way a policeman has to learn not to use his or her pistola." It's a weapon, a medium, that exists between self and other. One must become selfless, invisible, in order to relate to the other or vice versa. "When you meet the tiger on the trail, you become one with him instantly by your training so that there's no fear." Rather than ignorantly involving one's self in confrontational relationships, one intelligently unifies the selfhood between the two appearances and it becomes one reality. That's how you work with a Bolex. (Intro by Johnny Ray Huston; interview by Michelle Silva)