



Figure 1. Still from *BREAKAWAY* (dir. Bruce Conner, US, 1966). 16 mm film, b/w, sound, 5 min. Courtesy of the Conner Family Trust. © Conner Family Trust

Pop, Collaboration, Utopia: Bruce Conner's BREAKAWAY in 1960s Los Angeles

Johanna Gosse

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 every day 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 every day I'll wear what I want, and do what suits me fine
Breakaway, breakaway, breakaway from the everyday
—Toni Basil, “Breakaway”

While visiting Los Angeles in the fall of 1964, San Francisco-based artist Bruce Conner (1933–2008) began working on a film

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with Toni Basil, a young dancer, choreographer, and singer. Completed in 1966, *BREAKAWAY*¹ features Basil dancing energetically against an empty black backdrop to an upbeat sound track, a Motown-inspired pop song called “Breakaway” that she released in 1966 as the B-side to her first single, “I’m 28.”² Throughout the five-minute film, Conner deploys dizzying camera zooms, stroboscopic effects, and rapid-fire cuts that transform Basil’s choreography into a psychedelic spectacle of pulsating, blurred, ecstatic movement. Whereas the film’s first two and a half minutes are synched to the duration of the song, once the bass line starts to fade, both the flow of images and the sound track unexpectedly begin to play again in reverse, rewinding Basil’s performance back to the beginning—an audiovisual demonstration of the “breakaway from the everyday” called for in the song’s lyrics. An experimental dance film created specifically for the camera lens rather than for a live audience, *BREAKAWAY* is *ciné-dance*, a category that is exemplified within postwar American avant-garde cinema by Maya Deren’s *A Study in Choreography for the Camera* (1945).³ Like Deren’s film, *BREAKAWAY* is one of a number of significant avant-garde dance films made in Los Angeles, a tradition that has led film scholar David E. James to suggest that “it could be argued that the Los Angeles avant-garde cinema was founded on dance.”⁴ *Ciné-dance* is a subgenre within the larger history of dance on film, beginning with early cinema’s penchant for vaudeville acts like Loïe Fuller’s “Serpentine Dance,”⁵ and evolving over the decades into big-budget musicals, television variety shows like *Shindig!* (ABC, 1964–66) and *Hullabaloo* (NBC, 1965–66), music performance programs like *American Bandstand* (WFIL-TV, 1952–57; ABC, 1957–87) and *Soul Train* (syndicated, 1971–2006), promotional music videos, reality show competitions, and amateur dance videos uploaded to the Internet. In her long and varied career as a choreographer, Basil has engaged with each of these diverse styles and formats.⁶

Due to its combination of rapid-fire editing, go-go-style dancing, and a pop sound track, *BREAKAWAY* is frequently referred to as a “proto-music video,” and it has contributed to Conner’s reputation as “the father of MTV,” a title that dismayed

him.⁷ This characterization is reinforced by Basil's own success on MTV. She directed, choreographed, and starred in the iconic cheerleader-themed music video for her one-hit wonder "Mickey" (1982), which became a staple of the nascent network's early rotation.⁸ While it is often observed that commercial music videos have poached freely from experimental cinema, to in turn characterize avant-garde films as proto-music videos is to anachronistically designate them as anticipating a style of promotional filmmaking that, in fact, blatantly and deliberately appropriated from them. Such a retroactive logic tends to foreclose more culturally and historically specific modes of inquiry, and, perhaps worse, it risks the uncritical alignment of works of experimental cinema with industrial productions financed by the recording industry for explicitly promotional purposes. In the case of *BREAKAWAY*, the "proto-music video" moniker tends to neutralize the complex and historically specific ways in which the film merged avant-garde and popular forms with a utopian vision of social, sexual, and artistic liberation—a coalescence that culminates during the film's uncannily reversed second half.⁹

BREAKAWAY was born out of a collaboration between two friends, one an avant-garde filmmaker and visual artist and the other a professional choreographer who maintained strong ties to the Los Angeles underground art scene, both of whom shared a mutual interest in dance for camera. In Basil's words: "We were very close friends. We understood each other's art. It was a collaborative effort. Two artists, one that was a dancer and the other that was a filmmaker."¹⁰ This essay will begin with a close description of the film, then situate it within Conner's evolving mid-1960s practice, and conclude with an analysis of how Basil's work in Hollywood, and especially her involvement in rock-and-roll and pop musical film and television, framed *BREAKAWAY*'s production in mid-1960s Los Angeles. Refracted through Basil's career in the entertainment industry, *BREAKAWAY* emerges as a hybrid work of dance film that harnesses the utopian aspirations of both underground cinema and American popular culture during the social and political upheavals of the period.

“Breakaway from the Everyday”

BREAKAWAY’s opening credits list Basil’s given name, Antonia Christina Basilotta, instead of her shortened stage name, not only emphasizing her Italian heritage but also signaling the film as nonprofessional, distinct from the show business portfolio of Toni Basil, the Hollywood choreographer and pop singer. As the sound track revs up with a funky drumbeat, Basil first appears on-screen in a series of flickering long shots, wearing a black bra and polka-dot stockings, striking glamour poses against the stark black background. Here, she glances flirtatiously at the camera as her flamboyant gestures are intermittently frozen by the flicker, resulting in a staccato rhythm that is reminiscent of strobe lights. After segueing into the song’s first verse, she begins to dance wildly, spinning, shimmying, and leaping her way through multiple costume changes, including a white slip that gives her pale skin a delicate, almost ghostly appearance. Though she doesn’t lip-synch the lyrics, Basil acknowledges the camera by staring directly into the lens, confidently returning its gaze with a look that is at once innocent and seductive, inviting and defiant. Conner’s camera dances with her, punctuating her movements with rapid cuts and frenzied zooms that render her body an ethereal streak of white light against a black void, a spectral apparition that threatens to “breakaway” from visibility entirely.

Initially, the lyrics of “Breakaway” conform to the conventions of a breakup song, with Basil bemoaning the “twenty-pound ball hanging by a chain around my neck” in the classic style of girl pop empowerment. Yet once she arrives at the refrain, it becomes urgently clear that she is demanding more than an escape from the proverbial ball and chain. Chanting “Breakaway, breakaway, breakaway from the everyday” like a mantra, she calls for a release from the “wagging tongues,” “twisted minds,” and “chains that bind” that reinforce the codes of “everyday” society. As the music reaches a crescendo toward 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 into the camera. This momentary calm is disrupted once the visual chaos resumes in the second chorus, which is launched by

a throatier, almost snarling “Hey, Hey” from Basil. Here, portions of the celluloid appear spoiled with fogged edges and round holes that indicate the end of a 16 mm film roll; the perforations register visually as white orbs and resemble stage lights as they scroll vertically down the frame, while also suggesting a graphic match with the round holes in Basil’s stockings from the opening sequence. As the song approaches its final bars, Basil emerges totally nude, soaring across the frame in three slow-motion balletic leaps, as she declares, “And every day, I’ll wear what I want, and do what suits me fine,” the climax to a striptease that is as existential as it is erotic.

Once the drumbeat starts to wind down, both the flow of images and the sound track suddenly begin to play back but in reverse. Here Basil appears (supernaturally?) possessed as she is thrust back through space and time, defying gravity with her backward leaps and spins. The sound track is similarly transformed from a catchy pop tune into an illegible slur of noise and garbled speech, reminiscent of the backmasking techniques and tape loops used in psychedelic rock, as in the Beatles’ pioneering 1966 album *Revolver*.¹¹ With this unexpected reversal, the film seems to symbolically enact the breaking away from everyday experience that is repeatedly invoked by the title track—a release not only from gravitational space and progressive time but from language itself. This section hints at the possibility that the film will continue indefinitely, playing forward and then running backward in a never-ending loop—but this hope is dashed when the film ends just as abruptly as it began, with flickering shots of Basil coquettishly posing. The finale is marked by the playful addition of two split-second shots: a close-up of Basil posing in sunglasses, followed by a shot of her sitting cross-legged in paisley stockings and a garter belt, and concluding with a text insert that serves as another winking reference to Basil’s Italian heritage: “FINE.”

BREAKAWAY was not the first time Conner filmed a female friend dancing to a lively R&B sound track. His earlier film *COSMIC RAY* (US, 1961) features a nude female dancer, Conner’s friend Beth Pewther, who is juxtaposed with images of a fireworks display and fragments of found footage derived from newsreels, cartoons, advertisements, and educational shorts. The sound

track, a live recording of Ray Charles's 1959 hit "What'd I Say," amplifies the erotic connotations of Pewther's dancing through its sexually suggestive lyrics and famous call-and-response refrain, in which Charles and his female backup singers mimic the moans and groans of sexual ecstasy. By coupling Pewther's nude body with Charles's music, *COSMIC RAY* implies an interracial sexual encounter, while it also points to Conner's own cross-racial identification with the blind R&B musician, to whom he wished to pay tribute; in Conner's words, "I was supplying his vision."¹² Insofar as *COSMIC RAY* harnesses racial otherness as a signifier of cultural authenticity, liberated sexuality, and passionate feeling, Basil's blue-eyed soul variation on African American girl pop similarly injects *BREAKAWAY* with the unbridled libidinal energy often identified with black music and, by extension, its associations with political and cultural marginalization. In this sense, the song's demand to "breakaway from all the chains that bind" suggests a carceral analogy between liberating oneself from the "chains" of enslavement and from the oppressive strictures of patriarchal ideology—lending new significance to the lyrics, "every day I'll wear what I want, and do what suits me fine."

Though *BREAKAWAY* builds on certain themes and motifs developed in Conner's earlier films, it is not governed by the same Manichaeic logic that characterizes *COSMIC RAY* and his first and best-known film, *A MOVIE* (US, 1958), both of which combine images of sexually available women with found-footage depictions of violence, disaster and war, and, most iconically, atomic bomb explosions. In these two early films, Conner casts women as literal bombshells by repeatedly linking female sexuality to the existential threat posed by nuclear apocalypse. Yet in *BREAKAWAY*, Conner modifies this dualistic logic of sex versus death in order to pursue a more optimistic vision in which femininity and multimedia pop expression—music, dance, and film—become vehicles for liberation from the constraints of the everyday.

Even though *BREAKAWAY* marks a departure from Conner's earlier films by offering a more affirmative vision of both mass culture and female sexuality, its coherence as feminist critique is questionable, particularly due to its reliance on female objectifica-

tion as a source of visual pleasure.¹³ This tendency becomes clearer when *BREAKAWAY* is compared to a work by a contemporary of Conner's, the Bay Area avant-garde filmmaker Gunvor Nelson, whose 1972 film *Take-Off* subjects the striptease to a full-fledged feminist critique.¹⁴ *Take-Off* depicts an exotic dancer slowly removing her clothes for the camera, but instead of a stage or a bedroom, she performs in a nondescript black void, just like Basil in *BREAKAWAY* and Pewther in *COSMIC RAY*. When there is nothing left to remove, Nelson's subject begins to disassemble her own body, gradually removing her limbs, face, and hair, until she is completely dismembered and scattered into the cosmos. Viewed alongside Nelson's subversion of the striptease as an intergalactic "take-off," Basil's "breakaway" is, by comparison, temporary and provisional, an ecstatic diversion from the inevitable return to social order. Beyond the eeriness of its backward second half, Conner's film remains an essentially pleasurable, affirmative film, less concerned with a critique of gendered representation or Cold War cultural politics than with the aesthetics of film movement and the optical play generated by psychedelic effects.

Shifting away from the concerns of his earlier found-footage films like *A MOVIE* and *COSMIC RAY*, *BREAKAWAY* reflects Conner's emerging interests in psychedelic aesthetics and live performance, especially at the intersection of music, dance, and expanded cinema. Around the same time he began working with Basil, Conner was involved with the influential Bay Area choreographer Anna (formerly Ann) Halprin, whose San Francisco Dancers' Workshop attracted an illustrious group of dancers and artists, many of whom would go on to develop the postmodern dance scene that emerged around New York's Judson Church.¹⁵ This group included Simone Forti and Robert Morris, as well as Merce Cunningham, Yvonne Rainer, and Trisha Brown, three dancers who produced groundbreaking dance films. Halprin had a long-standing interest in cross-disciplinary collaboration and worked with many of the major figures in the Bay Area poetry, film, art, and music scenes, including the filmmaker James Broughton, who cast her as the dancing "Princess Printemps" in his film *Four in the Afternoon* (US, 1951).¹⁶ Conner attended Halprin's workshops

and served as a production consultant for her 1965 dance production *Parades and Changes*, which featured male and female dancers stripping off their clothes while unrolling, shredding, and crumpling large sheets of paper. Conner's involvement in Halprin's most iconic work informed his evolving performance aesthetic, particularly his approach to projecting multilayered illuminated images onto dancing bodies, the main component of the psychedelic light show practice that would absorb much of his attention toward the end of that decade.

Having experimented with various forms of illuminated projections to accompany live music—including a performance at the legendary San Francisco Trips Festival in January 1966—Conner joined the North American Ibis Alchemical Light Company (NAIAC) in the spring of 1967, which produced the in-house light show for the Family Dog concert series at the Avalon Ballroom, one of San Francisco's premiere rock music venues. The NAIAC's elaborate productions involved a complex arrangement of equipment and materials, including more than a dozen slide projectors displaying transparencies and liquid gels, and strobe lights aimed at the dancers' bodies on the floor below. In addition to these rapidly changing, colorful abstractions, Conner also projected 8 mm and 16 mm films, ranging from found footage derived from cartoons and newsreels to looped sections of his own films, including *COSMIC RAY*, *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* (US, 1967), and *BREAKAWAY*. In one particularly memorable instance, he juxtaposed a shot of Basil's nude slow-motion leap with a scene from a Betty Boop cartoon.¹⁷

Yet unlike choreography performed before a live audience, or a psychedelic light show accompanying a live rock concert, Basil's dance in *BREAKAWAY* was created specifically for Conner's camera lens. Her profilmic performance cannot be restaged, since its existence is predicated on the presence of the camera, Conner's kinetic cinematography, and an array of in-camera and postproduction visual effects, including stroboscopic flicker, rapid zooms, smeared abstractions, and rhythmic audiovisual correspondences. Rather than documenting Basil's movements from a fixed distance and with a stable perspective, Conner moved in tandem with her,

reproducing his camera's zooms, tilts, and pans with his own body. This choreographic cinematography implies a more open-ended and participatory mode of film authorship, one that partially destabilizes the classic binary of the (male) authorial, looking subject and the (female) object of the gaze. Even so, it ultimately falls back upon this traditional dynamic, with Conner controlling the camera and Basil performing before it. In this sense, it is not just Basil who teases the viewer but also Conner, who calls attention to his unseen presence as one third of this animated *pas de trois* among dancer, filmmaker, and camera.

As a so-called living room production made by a small group of friends for their own creative fulfillment and enjoyment, *BREAKAWAY* was not intended to function as a promotional film; indeed, Basil's frontal nudity would necessarily preclude any mainstream commercial use. Intimate and spontaneous in character, its production was distinct from numerous other modes of collaborative filmmaking, both artisanal and industrial. By emphasizing Basil's role as choreographer, performer, and vocalist, *BREAKAWAY* does not present itself as the visionary product of a singular, autonomous (male) auteur—Basil's talents are clearly a match for Conner's virtuosic camerawork, and both are essential to the dance. Moreover, *BREAKAWAY* was a one-time collaboration, not the result of an ongoing partnership or a close-knit domestic unit as were the films of Stan Brakhage, which he signed "by Brakhage" in order to emphasize the authorship of his wife Jane, their children, and their cottage industry manufacture within their family home.

Furthermore, while *BREAKAWAY*'s primitive pop aesthetics might initially prompt a comparison to Andy Warhol's prodigious filmmaking output at the simulacrum of a Hollywood studio he created within his New York Factory, the combination of sincerity and technical skill that characterizes Basil's performance distinguishes it from the blasé, zoned-out affect of Warhol's Superstars—the group of actors, artists, socialites, musicians, and other personalities who were often featured in Warhol's experimental films—in the laconic *Screen Tests* (1964–66). The contrast between Warhol's and Conner's cinematography is especially sharp: whereas



Figure 2. Still from *BREAKAWAY* (dir. Bruce Conner, US, 1966). 16 mm film, b/w, sound, 5 min. Courtesy of the Conner Family Trust. © Conner Family Trust

the former's trademark indifference was manifested by a typically static and often unattended camera, Conner's camerawork was, by comparison, hyperactively embodied, interactive, and seemingly mesmerized by its subject, Antonia Christina Basilotta, to whom I'll now turn.

Toni Basil, *The T.A.M.I. Show*, and PAS DE TROIS

Though Toni Basil never quite became a household name, in the mid-1960s she was at the beginning of a promising career in the entertainment industry as a triple threat, working primarily as a professional choreographer but also as a backup dancer, pop singer, and actress. During the late 1960s she appeared in a number of significant New Hollywood productions, many produced by Bob Rafelson's production company, Raybert/BBS Productions. She played a prostitute in Dennis Hopper's first two directorial efforts, *Easy Rider* (US, 1969) and *The Last Movie* (US, 1971), and had small roles in two films directed by Rafelson, the Monkees'

psychedelic musical *Head* (US, 1968) and *Five Easy Pieces* (US, 1970). Basil met Conner through a network of mutual friends, including Hopper and the actor Dean Stockwell, her boyfriend at the time, all of whom were part of a loose-knit social circle that gathered around the influential California assemblage artist Wallace Berman (1926–76).¹⁸

Deeply influenced by her involvement with the Berman circle, Basil began making her own personal, experimental 16 mm films that depicted her work in the entertainment industry and life as a bohemian artist in Los Angeles.¹⁹ Closely resembling *BREAKAWAY* is her 1968 film, *A Dance Film Inspired by the Music of Jim Morrison*, which features a multiracial cast of dancers, experimental camera effects like multiple exposures and stroboscopic flicker, and a sound track by Jimi Hendrix.²⁰ Beyond her personal filmmaking practice, Basil has explored the dynamic between dancer and camera in a variety of production modes, from choreographing rock-and-roll musicals and live stage acts, to directing music videos, to judging televised dance competitions, and, more recently, producing home videos of improvised choreography and rehearsals for her personal dance-themed YouTube channel.²¹ She does not distinguish between these creative contexts—professional or amateur, collaborative or solo, mass culture or subculture; for Basil, they are continuous and complementary, and they porously inform one another.

Basil had her first big break in the early 1960s, when her teacher and mentor, the Hollywood choreographer David Winters, hired her to assist on a number of big-budget productions, including *Viva Las Vegas* (dir. George Sidney, US, 1964), starring Elvis Presley and Ann-Margret, and the popular variety show *Shindig!* In the fall of 1964, around the same time that she began filming with Conner and when *Shindig!* first went on the air, Basil was also in rehearsals for *The T.A.M.I. Show* (dir. Steve Binder, US, 1964), an acronym for “Teen-Age Music International” or “Teenage Awards Music International.” Held at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium on 28 and 29 October, T.A.M.I. was a two-day concert that was filmed and released as a feature-length concert movie in Los Angeles theaters on 14 November, and nationally on 29 December. The

film was directed by Steve Binder, who would go on to direct popular variety shows like *Hullabaloo* and special musical programs, most famously, Elvis Presley's legendary 1968 "Comeback Special" for NBC. One of the most significant concert films ever made, *The T.A.M.I. Show* has since achieved cult status because it was removed from circulation shortly after its release, remaining viewable only occasionally on television and on low quality bootlegs and compilation VHS tapes, where it was often intermingled with performances from the *Big T.N.T. Show* (dir. Larry Peerce, US, 1966), the concert film that followed *The T.A.M.I. Show*.

Emceed by the surf rock duo Jan and Dean, T.A.M.I. featured many of the top musical acts of the moment across rock and roll, R&B, soul, and pop, including Chuck Berry, Lesley Gore, the Beach Boys, Gerry and the Pacemakers, the Miracles (later Smokey Robinson and the Miracles), Marvin Gaye, and the Supremes. The audience consisted of hundreds of screaming teenagers sourced from a local high school, whose reactions were dynamically intercut with the onstage performances in the final film to suggest a less hierarchical, more egalitarian engagement between audience and performer. Moreover, by assembling an integrated group of white and African American musicians and backup dancers to perform on the same stage, gathered before an audience of white and African American teenagers seated (or, more often, standing) side by side, *The T.A.M.I. Show* participated in the wave of visible racial integration in American film and television that began around 1964, the same year that federal antidiscrimination legislation was passed into law with the landmark Civil Rights Act.

Above all of its outstanding performances, T.A.M.I. is best remembered for its two final acts: James Brown and the Famous Flames, followed by the Rolling Stones in one of their first filmed appearances in the US. Brown's set was a show-stopping tour de force, replete with his signature theatrics: screeching howls, double-jointed shuffles and splits, and anguished falls to his knees, prompting him to be ushered offstage, only to defiantly toss off his cape in a triumphant recovery. Though following "The Hardest Working Man in Show Business" was an unenviable task, in *The T.A.M.I. Show* the Stones meet Brown's challenge in a character-

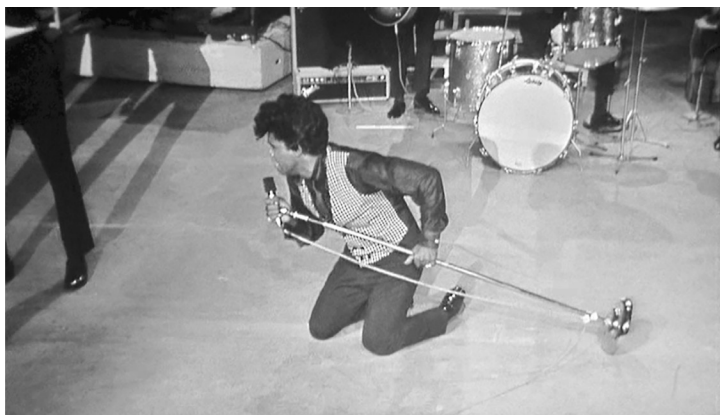


Figure 3. James Brown in *The T.A.M.I. Show*
(dir. Steve Binder, US, 1964)

istically brazen fashion, with Mick Jagger casting his unflinching stare at the cameras, defiantly turning his back on the audience, and, in the ultimate gesture of friendly competition, mimicking Brown's trademark move, a one-legged shuffle that glides laterally across the stage. With a frenzy of applause, the audience immediately recognizes and affirms Jagger's appropriation, and Brown was ultimately impressed by the British rocker's daring riposte.²²

As a firsthand witness to T.A.M.I.'s finale, Basil has recounted intricate details of Brown's virtuosic performance, Jagger's swaggering imitation, and her own attempts at mimicry: "I ran to the bathroom and tried to do his [Brown's] steps while looking in the mirror, trying to figure out his moves, his cadences."²³ She describes Jagger's dancing as both captivating and bizarre—a "paraplegic funky chicken" that was "post-modern" in its abstraction and self-reflexivity, reminding her of Elvis Presley, another white rock-and-roll icon who appropriated black music and dance styles:

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. (149–50, emphasis in original)

Around the same time that T.A.M.I. was in rehearsals at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, Basil and Conner initiated their collaboration just around the corner, at the apartment of a young curator, Jim Eliot, who lived above the merry-go-round on the Santa Monica Pier.²⁴ During their first session of filming, Stockwell was present and brought his camera to document the shoot.²⁵ Though Conner's camera yielded no viable footage during this initial session (with the exception of Basil's two split-second poses seen in *BREAKAWAY*'s final moments), Stockwell's footage provides a unique behind-the-scenes perspective on Conner and Basil's process. Significantly, the original film canister that housed Stockwell's footage included projection instructions listing the Rolling Stones' "Goin' Home" (1966) as its musical accompaniment; though the song was never synchronized as a sound track, it was played from a record during screenings in the 1960s and later. In 2006, Conner edited Stockwell's footage into a short film that he called *PAS DE TROIS*.

The title of *PAS DE TROIS* refers to the three-person dance among Basil, Conner, and Stockwell's camera, which recorded Basil dipping and diving in tandem with Conner as Conner filmed her dancing against a black screen—evidence of Conner's dynamic, dance-like cinematography. The footage also reveals Conner's own idiosyncratic style of dancing, where he shuffles from side to side by grinding his feet and lifting alternate legs, in a fashion that immediately recalls Brown's signature moves on the T.A.M.I. stage as well as Jagger's imitation thereof. To borrow Basil's comment, 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 this sense, *PAS DE TROIS* strongly suggests that Conner was familiar with Brown's performance style when he first began filming with Basil in the fall of 1964.²⁶ Furthermore, as a compan-

ion piece to *BREAKAWAY*, it testifies to the collaborative nature of Basil and Conner's process and the festive spirit that fueled their partnership.

An even more direct connection between *The T.A.M.I. Show* and avant-garde film made in Los Angeles is offered in Berman's film *Aleph* (US, 1966), which embeds actual footage of the Rolling Stones' performance from *The T.A.M.I. Show* within a montage of found images and home movies that Berman spent ten years editing, scratching, and painting over.²⁷ At the invitation of Basil, Berman and his son Tosh had visited T.A.M.I. rehearsals and attended the first day of the concert on 28 October, though they left early before the performances began, most likely to avoid the legions of screaming teenagers that had convened at the auditorium. Weeks later, Berman attended the theatrical film release of *The T.A.M.I. Show* and brought along his 8 mm camera to capture shots of the performers, especially Jagger, whom *Aleph* shows in close-up for a total of about thirty seconds. In addition, Berman includes a brief close-up of Basil's fellow dancer and friend, Teri Garr, as she dances behind Mary Wilson of the Supremes on the T.A.M.I. stage.²⁸

Considering its impact on films like *BREAKAWAY* and *Aleph*, *The T.A.M.I. Show* is not just a major milestone in pop music history, but it also provides key insights into the history of Los Angeles avant-garde cinema. Fusing music, dance, and film into a genre-defying display of live pop performance, *The T.A.M.I. Show* harnessed the utopian optimism of 1960s youth culture to break down racial and cultural barriers and, in a curious reconfiguration of Cold War rhetoric, to unite its youthful audience under the banner of "international" pop spectacle (presumably a reference to the recent British Invasion phenomenon), signaling the significance of pop music to US cultural imperialism. As a result of Basil's dual participation in the entertainment industry and the Los Angeles underground, *BREAKAWAY*, like *Aleph*, bears the traces of the utopian, festive, communal spirit that animated events like T.A.M.I. and invigorated popular music during the 1960s, when it served as the sound track to the political turmoil and countercultural resistance that marked this decade.²⁹



Figure 4. Still from PAS DE TROIS (US, 1966/2006), filmed by Dean Stockwell, edited by Bruce Conner. 16 mm film, b/w, sound, 8.5 min. Still capture provided by the Conner Family Trust.

Avant-Garde/New Hollywood

Given his participation in these overlapping circles of the avant-garde and the entertainment industry, it should come as no surprise that soon after completing *BREAKAWAY* Conner became increasingly involved in Hollywood film, taking on a variety of paid and informal production and postproduction roles, from serving as a location scout, to working as an editing consultant, to performing as an extra on numerous low-budget independent features, many of which were exploitation films dealing with countercultural themes like drugs, sex, and rock and roll.³⁰ Arguably, Conner's greatest influence on commercial filmmaking was channeled through his relationship with Hopper, who attempted to integrate Conner's signature techniques and use of pop music into both *Easy Rider* and his less successful follow-up, *The Last Movie*.

A quintessential example of New Hollywood cinema, *Easy*

Rider stars Peter Fonda and Hopper respectively as Wyatt, also known as Captain America, and Billy the Kid, two hippie bikers who venture on a cross-country ride from Los Angeles to Florida after making a lucrative drug deal. Wyatt and Billy arrive in New Orleans during Mardi Gras and visit a brothel, where they hire two prostitutes played by Basil and Karen Black. After partaking in the revelry on Bourbon Street, the foursome enters a decrepit cemetery and ingests LSD. Drifting among the tombstones in the thrall of unseen hallucinations, the characters laugh, weep, and strip off their clothes, exhibiting the recognizable symptoms of an acid trip. Hopper's debt to Conner is especially evident in the cemetery scene's discontinuous editing and psychedelic visual effects, which include stroboscopic flicker, as seen in *BREAKAWAY*, and misplaced titles that recall the fragments of film leader interspersed throughout *COSMIC RAY* and *A MOVIE*.³¹

In *Easy Rider*, the bodies of the female sex workers are visually and metaphorically aligned with the specter of death symbolized by the cemetery and the traumatic experience of a bad trip, a synecdoche of the road trip itself, which comes to a fatal end in the following scene. By comparison, *BREAKAWAY* utilizes psychedelic effects to produce a nuanced and playful vision of the female body as an illegible and dematerializing form, flickering in and out of visibility and difficult to trap in one's sights. This contrast was present 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 behind *BREAKAWAY*, *Easy Rider*'s production, in contrast, was notoriously fraught due to Hopper's drug-fueled megalomania and bullying of the cast and crew. Reportedly, Hopper was especially cruel during the cemetery scene, berating Fonda to dredge up the emotional pain of his mother's suicide, while demanding that Basil strip before crawling into a skeleton-filled tomb.³²

Despite these differences in tone and context, both *BREAKAWAY* and *Easy Rider* share an essentialist understanding of biological womanhood as a natural, quasi-cosmic force, and they are similarly constrained by this gendered logic. Whereas Hopper invokes classic tropes of masculine anxiety that associate female sexuality

and intoxication with death, *BREAKAWAY* associates the feminine and altered states with transcendent qualities, like (pro)creativity, sexual freedom, and utopian liberation. Nevertheless, Conner circumscribes the female body and, importantly, the female voice within the material and formal parameters of the cinematic apparatus, retaining the authority to rewind Basil's performance and, in essence, put her back in the can. In this sense, *BREAKAWAY*'s utopian premise is never fully realized, leaving her "chains" to the "everyday" temporarily loosened, but ultimately intact.

Conclusion

If *PAS DE TROIS* illuminates how *BREAKAWAY* and *The T.A.M.I. Show* are similarly animated by a utopian convergence of 1960s pop and avant-garde energies, then *Easy Rider* presents the dystopian underside to this utopian vision. Even so, each of these films adheres to Fredric Jameson's description of "utopian form" as "a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet."³³ In *BREAKAWAY*, this zone of "radical otherness" is figured by way of psychedelic visual and acoustic effects—namely, stroboscopic flicker, backward looping, and smeared afterimages, which work together to orchestrate a paradoxical sense of pleasurable disorientation. Like "so many sparks," Basil's dance seems to erupt from the screen, vibrating with metaphysical possibilities that remain permanently forestalled.

In this sense, *BREAKAWAY*, *The T.A.M.I. Show*, and *Easy Rider* all adhere to Jameson's characterization of utopian form as held "hostage" to the horizons of cultural imagination at a given historical moment, which leads him to conclude that often, "the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively" (xiii). Putting the political and ideological failures of these "sparks" to one side and instead focusing on their shared origins in Los Angeles in 1964 as well as their constellation of players—Basil, Conner,

Berman, and Hopper—can allow us to trace how these “comets” of avant-garde and popular culture explosively collided, resulting in new syntheses of hybrid, genre-defying artistic production.

Like Jameson, Tom Gunning insists on the value of failed utopias. In his discussion of an early example of *ciné-dance*, Fuller's “Serpentine Dance,” a key precursor to 1960s psychedelic light shows in its use of colorful light projections, Gunning proposes that we consider such works not as failed utopias per se but rather as artifacts of constantly shifting, expanding, and evolving conditions of possibility: “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.”³⁴ For Gunning, these utopian aspirations are less “failed” than merely “forgotten,” and they continue to radiate possibilities that can be activated by the “discovery of new horizons of experience.” As a product of social, cultural, and geographic convergence between the avant-garde and the culture industry, *BREAKAWAY* is a prime example of such a “forgotten utopia” for the ways it reflexively pairs the radical optimism of 1960s pop with the asymptotic (and thus impossible) pursuit of egalitarian intersubjective exchange that is implied by collaborative authorship. Herein lies the latent, if ultimately failed and forgotten, protofeminist logic of *BREAKAWAY*—Conner and Basil's rendering of the eternal feminine as spectral trace, uncanny echo, and elusive attraction, balanced precariously on the brink between bodily dematerialization and total collapse, yet poised expectantly toward new horizons of the “everyday,” ready to arrive.

Notes

1. Conner specified that the titles of his artworks and films appear in all capital letters.
2. Antonia Christina Basilotta, “Breakaway,” music and lyrics by Ed Cobb (Equinox, BMI, 1966). BREAKAWAY was actually shot before the song was recorded; the sound track was added to the final edit in 1966 and was not playing in the background during filming.
3. In 1967, the magazine *Dance Perspectives* coined the term *ciné-dance* and listed BREAKAWAY alongside Deren’s *Study*, Shirley Clarke’s *Dance in the Sun* (US, 1953), Ed Emshwiller’s *Dance Chromatic* (US, 1959) and *Thanatopsis* (US, 1962), Hilary Harris’s *Nine Variations on a Dance Theme* (US, 1966), Babette Mangolte’s *WaterMotor* (US, 1978) (featuring Trisha Brown), and the films of Yvonne Rainer as key examples of the hybrid medium. More recently, the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia featured BREAKAWAY in a 2009 exhibition of camera-based dance works titled “Dance with Camera.” See Jenelle Porter, ed., *Dance with Camera* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2010).
4. David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 248.
5. Though Fuller’s “Serpentine Dance” was initially created for the vaudeville stage, many early film studios and directors such as the Skladanowsky Brothers, Thomas Edison, Georges Méliès, and the Lumière Brothers filmed dancers performing the dance (though it was never performed by Fuller herself in the films), along with close imitations, such as Annabelle Moore’s “Butterfly Dance.”
6. A major proponent of “street” and “ghetto” dancing, African American vernacular styles that anticipated hip-hop, Basil was a founding member of The Lockers, a dance crew that formed in the early 1970s and specializes in the “locking” method pioneered by fellow founder Don “Campbellock” Campbell. For an analysis of Basil’s fusion of “ghetto” and avant-garde dance forms, see Sally Banes, “Lock Steady,” in *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 133–36.

7. Conner was aware of MTV's stylistic poaching from his work, stating, "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." Quoted in Scott MacDonald, "Conversation with Bruce Conner, July 2001," in *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 254.
8. In 1983, critic David Ehrenstein pointed out this connection, writing, "After all, wasn't Conner a chief architect of the [music video] 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?*" David Ehrenstein, "Pre-MTV," *Film Comment* 19, no. 4 (1983): 41–42.
9. For an insightful analysis of this dynamic, see David E. James, "Avant-Garde Film and Music Video: A View from Zurich," in *Power Misses: Essays across (Un)Popular Culture* (London: Verso, 1996), 230–47.
10. Toni Basil, phone interview with the author, 12 March 2012. Basil notes that she not only supplied the film's choreography and vocals but also selected and designed costumes for the film, such as cutting large polka dots into the black stockings she is seen wearing in *BREAKAWAY*'s opening and closing scenes.
11. Conner would later use the Beatles' "Tomorrow Never Knows" (1966), one of the earliest examples of backward tape loops in psychedelic rock, as the sound track for his film *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* (US, 1967).
12. Quoted in a transcript of the discussion following a screening of his films at the 1968 Flaherty Seminar, published as "Bruce Conner," *Film Comment* 5, no. 4 (1969): 17.
13. Of all of Conner's films, his most coherent critique of female objectification (and specifically, of the striptease form) is offered in *MARILYN TIMES FIVE* (US, 1973), which subjects a grainy stag film to monotonous repetition, gradually draining it of visual pleasure and erotic appeal. However, the film falls short

- of making an explicitly feminist statement, a point clarified by dance historian and critic Sally Banes. Banes argues that Conner's "stylized, exaggerated, and repetitive" depictions of women, though "outlandish," fail to "contravene the standard social meaning of 'the female.' Reproducing iconography of mainstream culture, these transferences of female images leave gender codes intact." Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 228.
14. 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 (1977): 28–36; and John Sundholm, ed., *Gunvor Nelson and the Avant-Garde* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).
 15. Halprin's workshops and their influence on postmodern dance and the Judson Church scene are detailed in Janice Ross, "Atomizing Cause and Effect: Ann Halprin's 1960s Summer Dance Workshops," *Art Journal* 68, no. 2 (2009): 62–75; see also Janice Ross, *Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
 16. Halprin's workshops often featured musical accompaniment by Bay Area minimalist composers such as Morton Subotnick, La Monte Young, and Terry Riley, who were founding members of the San Francisco Tape Music Center in the Haight-Ashbury and frequent collaborators of Conner's. Conner and other Canyon Cinema filmmakers held screenings at the Tape Music Center, and Halprin also held workshops in the space. For more on Conner's and Halprin's involvement with the center, see David W. Bernstein, ed., *The San Francisco Tape Music Center: 1960s Counterculture and the Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 34 and 222–38, respectively.
 17. Cofounded by filmmakers Ben Van Meter and Roger Hillyard and managed by Conner in its final year, the NAIAC performed several nights a week at the Avalon until the group disbanded in the spring of 1968. Bruce Conner, interview with Kristine Stiles, 17 December 1985, transcript, Bruce Conner Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
 18. For more on the Berman circle, see Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna, eds., *Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and His*

Circle (New York: D.A.P./Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2005); and Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1991).

19. *Game of the Week* (dir. Toni Basil, US, 1967) depicts a pickup 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. *Our Trip* (dir. Toni Basil, US, 1967) documents Basil's trip to London with fellow dancers Teri Garr and Ann Marshall and includes fleeting glimpses of John Lennon and George Harrison.
20. Digitized copies of Basil's 16 mm films, including *A Dance Film Inspired by the Music of Jim Morrison*, are located in the Bruce Conner Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
21. Basil uploads examples of her choreography from film and television to YouTube, where she also debuts new videos of rehearsals and improvised routines with friends and collaborators in her home studio. Her YouTube channel, "Toni Basil's House," can be viewed at www.youtube.com/user/ToniBasilsHouse (accessed 29 April 2015).
22. Though Brown immediately recognized Jagger's performance as an imitation, T.A.M.I. sparked a long-standing affinity, instead of a rivalry, between Brown and the British rockers: "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, 1986), 154–55.
23. Toni Basil, interview by Simon Spence, in Andrew Loog Oldham, *2Stoned*, ed. Christine Ohlman (London: Secker and Warburg, 2002), 148.
24. Significantly, the merry-go-round building at the Santa Monica Pier had been host to another influential artistic encounter between the San Francisco and Los Angeles avant-gardes during the "Action" exhibition of abstract painting in 1955 organized by the Los Angeles gallery Syndell Studio (founded by Walter Hopps, who would start Ferus Gallery with Edward Kienholz in 1957) in conjunction with San Francisco's Six Gallery. Hopps played jazz music to accompany the works in the exhibition, which intermingled with the ambient sounds of the pier's

- amusements. This radical confluence of high art and popular entertainment would set the stage for Conner and Basil's collaboration on *BREAKAWAY* nine years later, in 1964, in the apartment above the merry-go-round. For more on the so-called Merry-Go-Round Show, see Lucy Bradnock, "Walter Hopps's Los Angeles Pastoral," *Art Journal* 71, no. 1 (2012): 126–37; Ken Allan, "Creating an Avant-Garde in 1950s Los Angeles: Robert Alexander's Hand-Printed Gallery Brochure in the Archives of American Art," *Archives of American Art Journal* 42, nos. 3–4 (2002): 21–26; and Serge Guilbaut, "The Anti-Square Merry-Go-Round Show: Action and Politics in Los Angeles," in *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art, 1945–1980*, ed. Rebecca Peabody et al. (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011), 63–65.
25. The apartment's location and its owner, Eliot, are mentioned in Gerald Matt and Jean Conner, "Jean Conner in Conversation with Gerald Matt," in *Bruce Conner: The 70s*, ed. Barbara Steffen (Nuremberg, Germany: Moderne Kunst Nurnberg, 2011), and were confirmed in the author's interview with Jean Conner, San Francisco, CA, 12 April 2014. This first shoot in 1964 was followed by a subsequent shoot where Hopper was present and assisted with lighting.
 26. Though the events documented in *PAS DE TROIS* ostensibly took place in the weeks before the T.A.M.I. concert was staged, Basil and Conner were presumably both familiar with Brown's style of dancing—Basil through her work as a professional choreographer, and Conner as a fan of the soul singer. According to Conner's wife, Jean Conner, he attended a James Brown concert in 1963 while they were living in Brookline, Massachusetts. Jean Conner, interview with the author.
 27. An in-depth description of *Aleph* is provided in James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde*, 278–80.
 28. Though Berman did not include any shots of Brown in *Aleph*, he did include Brown (alongside Cassius Clay, Lee Harvey Oswald, and Jagger and Charlie Watts of the Rolling Stones) in one of his "Verifax" collages of 1964, which he subsequently titled *Papa's Got a Brand New Bag* after Brown's 1965 hit single. For more on Berman's interest in African American music, see Ken Allan, "City of Degenerate Angels: Wallace Berman, Jazz and *Semina* in Postwar Los Angeles," *Art Journal* 70, no. 4 (2011): 76.

29. In a recent essay comparing *The T.A.M.I. Show* to *Viva Las Vegas* (which Basil also worked on) and Richard Lester's *A Hard Day's Night* (UK, 1964), David E. James highlights the utopian character of rock music culture during the 1960s and its critical role in the emerging counterculture. See David E. James, "Rock 'n' Film: Generic Permutations in Three Feature Films from 1964," *Grey Room*, no. 49 (2012): 6–31.
30. Conner made cameos in two low-budget psychedelic exploitation films: as a pot-smoking hippie in *The Trip* (dir. Roger Corman, US, 1967) and as a background dancer in *The Cool Ones* (dir. Gene Nelson, US, 1967) in a club scene choreographed by Basil. Elsewhere he worked behind the scenes, helping with location scouting and casting for Richard Rush's *Psych-Out* (US, 1968) and working as an associate producer for Peter Fonda's directorial debut, *The Hired Hand* (US, 1971).
31. Joan Rothfuss, "Escape Artist," in *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story*, ed. Joan Rothfuss (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1999), 163. Elsewhere Hopper stated: "Bruce Conner was a very important artist in my life because he made the best experimental films . . . best short films that I've still ever seen. And they include a lot of my editing thoughts and editing direction in *Easy Rider*." Quoted in *Dennis Hopper: A System of Moments*, ed. Peter Noever and Daniela Zyman (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2001), 27.
32. For an account of the fraught production of *Easy Rider*, see Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock-'n'-Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 63–64.
33. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), xii.
34. 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: Amsterdam University Press, 2002), 76–77.

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Figure 5. Still from *BREAKAWAY* (dir. Bruce Conner, US, 1966). 16 mm film, b/w, sound, 5 min. Courtesy of the Conner Family Trust. © Conner Family Trust