

# CHOREOGRAPHY OF CINEMA

## AN INTERVIEW WITH SHIRLEY CLARKE

LAUREN RABINOVITZ

Shirley Clarke was an important figure in the development and growth of the American independent film movement in New York City in the 1950s and 1960s. Her experimental, documentary, and dramatic narrative films made between 1953 and 1967 were among the most prominent productions of the New York avant garde. Clarke's dramatic and documentary feature-length films, *The Connection* (1961), *The Cool World* (1963), and *Portrait of Jason* (1967), tackled controversial subjects using an artistic style that drew upon European art cinema and the documentary tradition. Her work remains at the forefront of American cinéma vérité.

Clarke was also an important leader for the New York film community during the 1960s. As the only woman filmmaker successfully making feature films, Clarke became a role model and mentor for other young women filmmakers. She and Jonas Mekas co-founded two film distribution companies for independent filmmakers: Film-Makers Cooperative and Film-Makers Distribution Center. She fought for relaxation of censorship controls in commercial theaters using her own film, *The Connection*, as a court test case in 1961 and 1962. Throughout the 1960s, she championed both independent filmmakers who represented an alternative to Hollywood and the development of a commercially viable independent film network. Clarke's efforts broadened and aided a new politically relevant cinema that reflected the cultural alienation many felt in the 1960s.

In the 1970s, Clarke turned to video. Her award-winning video dance works have been featured in festivals in Los Angeles, New York City, Europe, and Japan. *Four Journeys into Mystic Time* (1980) is a series of four video dance pieces in which Clarke relies on the unique formal capabilities of video in the same way she depended upon specifically cinematic properties for her experimental films. In these tapes her choreography of images is still based on compositional flow of movement and editing rhythms, but she also manipulates the plasticity of the televised image itself. Clarke employs video technology like chroma keying and computer processing, layering her images, varying scales of objects within the frame, building afterimage traces into shadowy lines of intense moving light and color. She stretches, elongates, and distorts objects and figures. The video works manifest Clarke's continuing use of visual abstraction as important choreographic material.

Clarke moved to non-dance material in 1981 in two one-act video monologues written by Sam Shepard and performed by actor Joseph Chaikin. Clarke's *Savage Love* (1981) and *Tongues* (1982) do away with stage positions and speeches as the play's basic content. Clarke emphasizes the act of speaking itself, gesture, and the human figure as the basic material for her choreographic editing. She processes the taped images through a variety of special effects that slow down, repeat, distort the image, and insert smaller images within the frame. Clarke heightens the expressive abstract qualities of the actor's performance, and, in so doing, she transforms the material into rhythmic video dances.

Between 1975 and 1983, Clarke taught film and video at University of California at Los Angeles. She recently directed an original Los Angeles stage production which won the *L.A. Weekly* award for Best New Play in 1982. Most recently, Clarke has lectured in various American cities at an important film series retrospective, "The American New Wave." The series, coordinated by the Walker Art Center and Media Study/Bufallo, revives a number of independent films from the 1950s and 1960s that display a commitment to political and artistic issues and employed low budgets, small crews, and cinéma vérité style.

The following interview was excerpted from lengthy conversations recorded on September 23, 24, and 26, 1981, in Chicago. The broad subject of the complete interview was Clarke's film career, her approaches to individual films, and her involvement in the New York independent film movement. The importance of Clarke's political commitment has already been discussed in such journals as *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Film Culture*, and *Film Quarterly*. What appears here is organized according to my selected thematic interest in how Clarke's aesthetic, formal, and technical decisions have shaped her cinematic sensibility. Coincidentally, when I spoke with Clarke, she was editing *Tongues* and *Savage*

*Love*, and was engaged in a process which also stimulated her own reflections on the underlying aesthetics and philosophy which have evolved from her films into her video work.

### Experimental Films: 1953-1958

**Lauren Rabinovitz:** Let's begin with your first film, *Dance in the Sun* (1953). Before then you were a dancer, and this film represents your crossover into a new medium. It gave you a chance to apply your ideas about dance to film.

**Shirley Clarke:** That film got made because Danny Nagrin and his wife Helen Tarniris were friends of mine. [Daniel Nagrin and Helen Tarniris were leading choreographer/dancers in the development of American modern dance in the late 1940s and early 1950s]. I had a Bolex camera that was given to me as a wedding gift, and I made a lot of home movies that were funny, cute, and even good. I thought that the dance Danny did was supposed to be on a beach, because it was called *Dance in the Sun*. So I thought to myself, "That should be easy to film because I'll just go to Jones Beach, and we'll film Danny doing his dance, and I'll get a lot of good footage." We got some equipment from a rental place, and a few helpers went out to Jones Beach. Poor Danny couldn't dance on the sand. He would sink up to his neck. So we put some sand over concrete, and I shot the dance. But Danny got shin-splints.

Then I got this idea. I remembered that I had liked the dance on stage. I thought, "Well, if I really study the shots carefully I can also shoot the dance on stage, shoot the exact same angles, and then cut from the stage to the beach and back and forth, then you'll know why he's dancing on a beach. Otherwise he looks artsy or pretentious leaping around on the beach in a stylized dance. But if you see that he goes from the stage and I have a little shot at the opening of the film of him taking a shell out of his case and staring at it, a special film connection is made."

That was not only the first good idea I got about filmmaking, it is the only idea I've gotten. Everything I've done is based on the duality of fantasy and reality. Editing separate pieces of film together playing with time and space allows the viewer to travel with me. All the kinds of things I discovered about the choreography of editing and the choreography of space/time came from making that very first film. The idea of leaping from the stage and landing on the beach was a revelation to me. I still can't get over that you can do it (laughs). It just strikes me as a wonderful leap of not only magic but of concept, as a way of encompassing the universe.

**LR:** That's interesting because one of the major concepts that Maya Deren wrote about over and over was the spatio-temporal cut. With it, you can create a wholly new cinematic, synthetic geography.

**SC:** Right. She talked about it all the time. Always. One of the things, though, that I've never totally understood and I'm still trying to figure out is this space between the cuts. In other words, there is always more or less time, no matter what, even if you make a perfect match. There is a period of time that exists between any cut from one piece to another. A dissolve supposedly tries to handle time/space by schmearing it so that one evolves out of the other. But when you cut from shot to shot, there is a certain amount of time that is unaccounted for. I think it's an emotional experience as well as a physical experience.

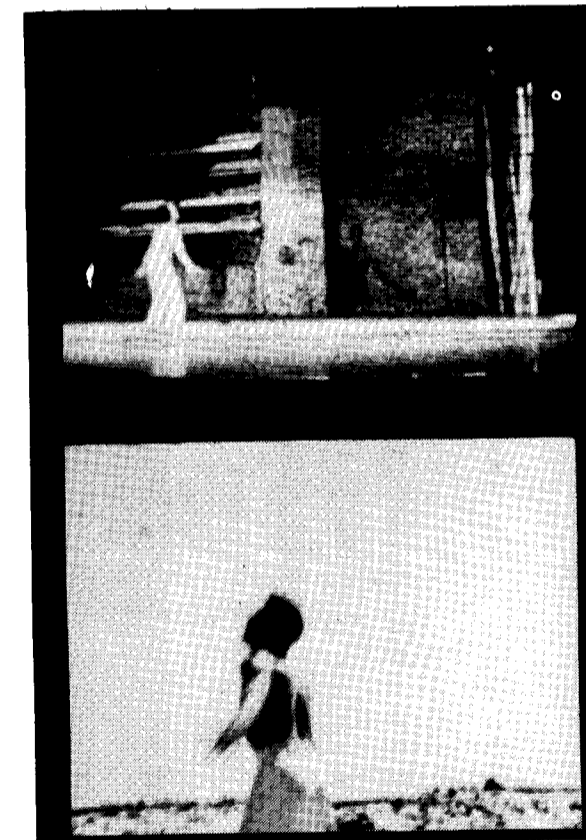
Somehow the time and space in film turns out to be relevant to almost every concept I have about film: how I choose the subject, as a way of looking at film, and as a way of understanding and working with it. There is no doubt in my mind that the way I filmed *The Connection* (1961), *The Cool World* (1963), and even *Portrait of Jason* (1967) came from these concerns. You could be in a closed-in space for 12 hours like I was with *Jason* and in the finished two-hour film feel that you've been there for 12. Editing image is the essence of film.

**LR:** Is *Bullfight* (1955) a more elaborate attempt to explore this concept in cine-dance?

**SC:** Well, in many ways that film doesn't really quite work. But it has a couple of moments in it that are extraordinary. One of them has to do with the death of the bull. The story is about a woman watching her lover fighting a bull and how he kills the bull. In the original dance, the solo dancer is both the matador and the woman watching, and I just added the fact that she was also the bull. I came up with several exciting concepts for me. I used repetition; I re-choreographed the film. I employed abstract use of color, fast editing, layered images.

**LR:** *A Moment in Love* (1957) accomplishes all that, too. But, for me, it represents an important stylistic departure from *Bullfight*.

**SC:** Yes, I started choreographing the camera as well as the



Frame enlargements from *Dance in the Sun* (1953). Top frame from the prologue; middle and bottom pairs are edit points from one sequence. All films by Shirley Clarke.

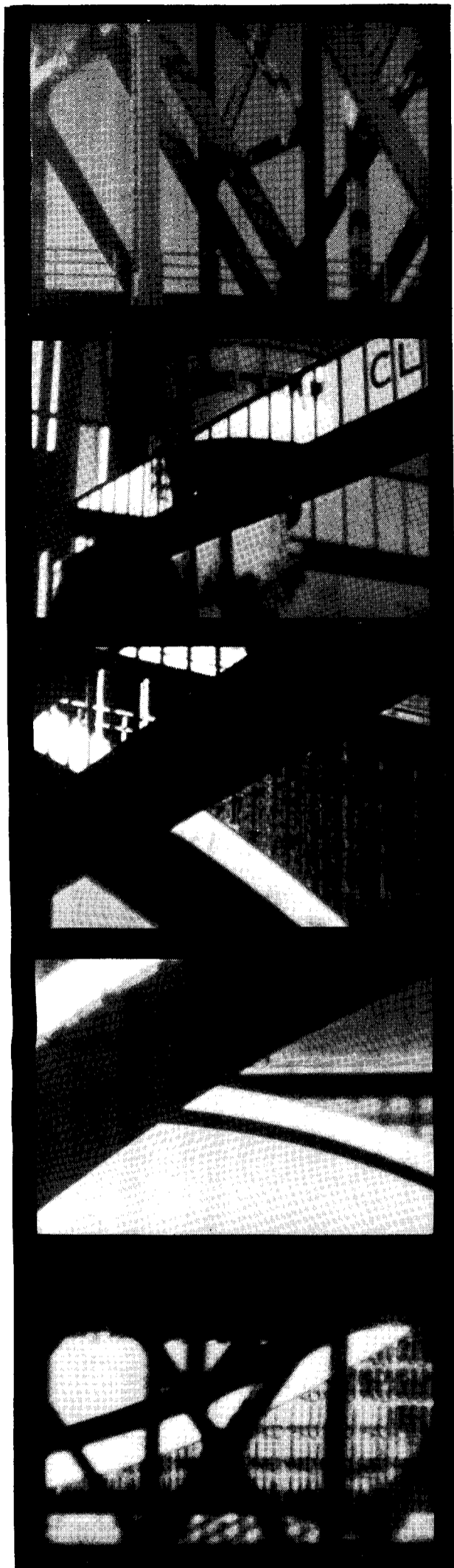
dancers in the frame.

**LR:** By choreographing the camera itself, you can add a whole new level of *dance*. *Bridges-Go-Round* (1958), which is my favorite of your experimental films, is then a logical progression from *A Moment in Love*, because you extend the concepts to make inanimate objects dance.

**SC:** Yes. *Bridges-Go-Round* comes out of *In Paris Parks* (1954), which simply establishes the fact that you can make dance films without using dancers.

By then I had gotten my first job. Willard Van Dyke ran into me in 1957 and told me he was producing little films for the United States Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World Fair, and they were going to have all these little loop movies playing around the pavilion. They were to be little bits of Americana. He asked if I would be interested in helping make some of these little film loops, and this took about a year. While I did the filming in and around New York City and the editing, Donn Pennabaker traveled around the United States collecting images that he sent back to me. We made about 30 loops. Penny made some, I made some, and Ricky Leacock and Wheaton Galentine each made one. I came up with a lot of rhythmic editing in order to get these three minute loops to work. I had to get a lot of information into 100 feet of film. Those loops were a big hit at the fair.

One of the first ones I did was called *Houses*, and I did some very, very slick three and four frame edits that built a house up and then took it back down again. We had been told



Shot sequence from *Bridges-Go-Round* (1958-59).

that the one subject we couldn't do was jazz. So I made them all jazzy. It became a game that Penny and I played both in the shooting and in the editing.

My loop of the New York City bridges was refused by the State Department. They had wanted different bridges all over the country, not just the bridges around Manhattan, so they gave me the footage. My basic principle about doing *Bridges-Go-Round* was the phenomenon of how you feel when you're in a train and the lampposts go by. I noticed that the same things happened as we drove over and under bridges.

By then I had also developed the idea I first used in *Moment in Love*: bi-packing. I knew that in superimposing—passing something through the camera twice—one image ghosted, and I didn't like that. I knew that if I laid one piece of film over another on my little viewer, it looked just wonderful. So I went to a lab and asked why they couldn't do that. They said it wasn't very safe, and I said, "I don't care. See if you can." They did, and that's it. By the time I got to *Bridges*, I knew that that was going to be a way to get the effect of layered spinning bridges.

**LR:** Why did you decide to do the two scores?

**SC:** Well, that's an interesting story. My friends, Louis and Bebe Barron, were doing electronic music. They did the score for the science fiction film *Forbidden Planet* (1956). They were busy making all this new music, and we'd always go by their studio and hear what they were doing. I loved the sound of electronic music. They agreed to let me have some of the

*Forbidden Planet* music for the track so I could enter *Bridges* in the 1958 Brussels Experimental Film Festival. But Louis and Bebe both really believed that MGM in those days would recognize one electronic three minutes from another. So, they said I'd have to get a new track if I wanted to release the film.

I got Teo Macero (who had done the score for *A Moment in Love*) to write the score. His whole thing is taking one note and playing with it electronically. All those voices are just one sound that has been filtered electronically and mixed with jazz. For a while, the film went out with the jazz track. Finally, about 10 years after the movie was out, Louis and Bebe came to me and said they thought it would be okay to release their music to me. I said that the Museum of Modern Art would like to release both versions of the film together. They said OK. It's a wonderful way to see the film because you can see how sound changes content.

#### Documentary Films: 1959-1960

**LR:** With *Bridges*, you had achieved a perfect blend of choreographing sound, composition within the frame, color, space, and rhythm. What made you then decide to switch to documentary film?

**SC:** Well, by the time I completed *Bridges-Go-Round*, Willard, Ricky Leacock, Donn Pennabaker, and I decided we'd share space together on 43rd St. We called ourselves Filmmakers, Inc. We got a place and made little cubbyholes for each of us, and in the middle was this big space for communal activities. Pennabaker set up a projector so that in the leftover space we could look at movies. This place became a major New York headquarters. We helped John Cassavetes get started. I lent him my camera equipment to shoot *Shadows* (1958). Through him, we met Jean-Luc Godard. A lot of experimental filmmakers also came by. In other words, a lot of the American New Wave film movement and the development of cinéma vérité took place with all of us interacting with each other.

Because I did such a good job on the loops, Willard decided to let me help him on his next project, *Skyscraper* (1959). He had been trying for several years to keep track of a building demolition and the erection of the Tishman Building on the same site. He had a lot of footage, some of it very beautiful and some of it very boring, and he didn't know what to do with it. He asked if I would take a look.

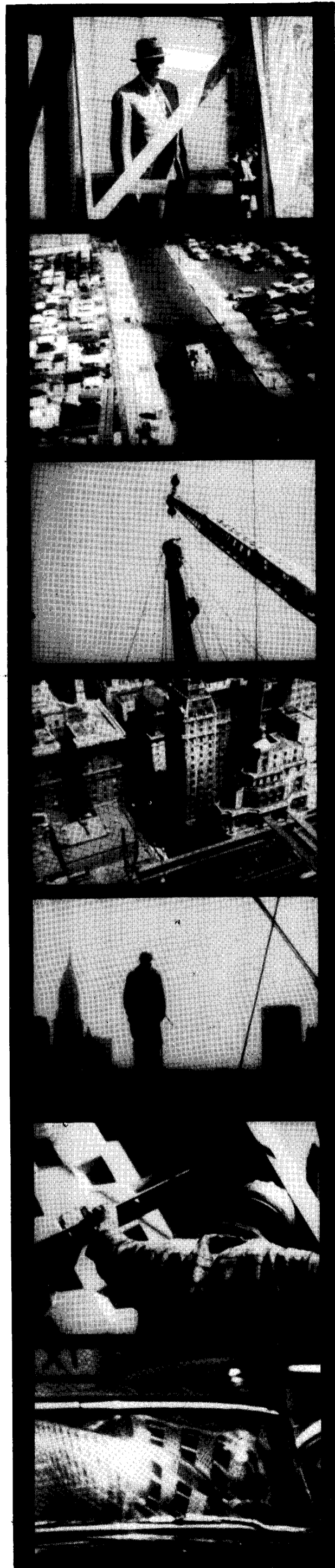
The thing that first interested me was that it was 35mm, and I had never done a 35mm movie. Some of the photography was absolutely gorgeous. I decided that I could make it into a musical comedy; I had always wanted to make one. I fooled around with a lot of dumb ideas and finally came up with the idea that the workers who built the building would be the narrators. It was really important to me to try to solve the problem of the disembodied God-like voice that was the narration style in the 1950s. It made them all seem pretentious. I got Teo Macero to do the music, and Johnny White, an actor-writer-friend of mine, did the dialogue and lyrics with me.

While I was editing *Skyscraper*, I would be sitting at my moviola putting a sequence together when I would suddenly come across a shot of reflections in the skyscraper windows, and I thought that would make a good sequence. So one of the filmmakers would go out with a roll of film and make some reflections, and if he still had some film left, he would take something else. I would look at that, and I'd say, "Oh, that's great." It was really handmade movies, made in the editing process of bits and pieces.

*Skyscraper* took prizes everywhere. It started off at the Venice Film Festival, and it got first prize for a short film. Thorold Dickinson, who was at the United Nations, was on the jury. In fact, that's how I came to do *A Scary Time* (1960) for the U.N. [Dickinson, a British documentary and dramatic filmmaker, headed the United Nations Office of Public Information from 1956 to 1960. In his job, he supervised documentaries for the U.N.] When I did *A Scary Time*, I learned how to shoot dramatic scenes, like mommy and daddy watching TV and the kid kissing them good-night, so that it looked real and would cut in successfully with documentary footage. No big deal, but it was a start. After making *A Scary Time* I was getting clearer and clearer that I wanted to make dramatic films. *Skyscraper* proved that I could take what seemed to be a documentary subject and, by theatricalizing the shooting and editing style, make a musical that is really entertaining.

#### Feature Films: 1961-1967

**SC:** By the time I finished *A Scary Time*, *Skyscraper* had gotten me an Academy Award nomination, and my name was around. I thought that next I'd like to do a feature. My brother-in-law Ken [critic Kenneth Tynan] was an enormous supporter of the Off-Broadway play, *The Connection*. He wrote a review in the *New Yorker* that made it a big artistic success. So one rainy night I went to see it. I just knew it was photogenic and that it would be a perfect vehicle for me to explore ideas I had about dramatic feature filmmaking. I got in touch with the author, Jack Gelber. He liked the fact that I agreed to let him work with me on the script so that he could maintain some control. We made a deal and proceeded to work on the screenplay for months. We sat at the kitchen table in my little house on E. 87th St., and we would write down screen directions like "pan slowly up to eyes then pull back." I mean, endless camera directions, all of which were being paced out in a room all of 10 feet. But when we got on the set, it was not possible to make a single shot the way it was written. That was wonderful for me because I had to improvise and react emotionally to the actors and what was happening. It saved me



because I found a style that was real and not necessarily Jack's preconceptions of what should happen.

Richard Silbert, who designed the set, also did something absolutely extraordinary. He enclosed the set so it had four sides with stairs coming up from below, which was quite an innovation. There was also half a skylight covering the top half of the set. Although this meant that the sound had to be done in a very complicated way, it also meant that nobody could be on the set except me, the cameras, and the actors. That put Jack and everybody else high above us on a little catwalk. Though we were on a sound stage, my first, it was like being in a downtown New York pad.

Everybody thought the film—like the play—was mainly about drug addiction. But I do not think that is what the play is about, nor do I think the film is about that. I think it's about alienation, and that was something with which I did identify. Those were the days when I had a deep understanding of the word, and drugs as yet had nothing to do with it. I think *The Connection*, *The Cool World*, and *Portrait of Jason* are all about alienation. As a woman in this world and a woman filmmaker, I know a lot about alienation.

**LR:** Did you feel isolated as a woman filmmaker? How did you cope with it?

**SC:** I think all women filmmakers are aware of it. It was the subject of a lot of the conversations I had with Maya Deren. We agreed that we were always going to present a united front to the world. We did, if it was at all necessary in terms of supporting each other, backing each other, helping each other. We were very clear about the fact that we were isolated. We were aware that it was no cinch to be a lady filmmaker.

pendent films. But when push came to shove, none of the filmmakers or their backers were willing to allow this organization to distribute the films. But the people who made short films were willing. So the Film-Makers Cooperative original plan to produce and distribute movies did not take off the ground for features, but it did for short experimental films in 1962.

At that point, I only gave money because I had other distributors for my shorts. But on the books, I co-chaired the Coop with Jonas. Each year he would pay me a visit and I would sign a piece of paper for the next year, and I'd give him \$200 to help out. Then five years into it, Jonas came by and said, "It's not legal any more for us to do this. We're going to have to have elections." The Coop was getting mixed up with his film magazine *Film Culture*, and other sorts of crossover things were happening. [In 1963, Clarke, Mekas, and filmmaker Louis Brigante tried again to create an organization to distribute theatrically independent feature films. Film-Makers Distribution Center lasted from 1963 to 1967 and was housed in the same headquarters as Film-Makers Cooperative.]

It's a really strange thing. I'll tell you what happened. During the period that Jonas and I were running Film-Makers Coop and Film-Makers Distribution Center, he was putting together the Anthology Film Archives. Then in 1967 after Film-Makers Distribution Center had folded, I turned around and read in a magazine that Anthology Film Archives had not only officially started but that the list of filmmakers whose work would be in the archive did not include me. It did not include Ed Emshwiler; it did not include Stan VanDerBeek; it did not include Robert Breer. There were a bunch of filmmakers that were excluded, and I got very upset, absolutely furious. I tried to

did not participate in the making of the film. He was not even going to read my script. When the film was finished, he would come and see it.

I would not have been able to make *The Cool World* had I not been living with Carl Lee at that time. [A Harlem-born black actor, Lee had previously been in the stage and film versions of *The Connection*. He and Clarke lived together off and on throughout the 1960s. In 1961, Clarke had separated from her husband, lithographer Burt Clarke, and she divorced him in 1963.] It took Carl three months of going up to Harlem all the time, gathering kids, and bringing them down for us to interview. For a while, we really thought we weren't going to be able to cast the film because we were getting all the "good" kids in school, and they weren't giving us believable readings. When I finally persuaded Carl to try to get to the gangs and bring some of those kids downtown, most of them couldn't read scripts. What we would do was improvise with them. It was very exciting because the "real" kids started to improvise the script we had written right back to us. That's when I knew our script was OK. From then on we got to work, and my relationship with the kids was wonderful.

I told Fred that I really thought we had to shoot the film in the street and that it could be tough. But if we could get a mixed crew, a few real supporters, and I was lucky enough, we might be able for the first time to make a film about Harlem in Harlem. This wonderful woman, Madeleine Anderson, was helping Ricky Leacock, who was doing a number of films that dealt with black people. He was also teaching black people to become cameramen. He had a volunteer class, and many of them became the major black cameramen in the city for a long time. Madeleine was this amazing lady who wanted to make a movie herself and subsequently made a film for WNET and the Children's Workshop. She agreed not only to be my assistant but to stay with me through the whole film. Eventually she became my assistant editor. She would go out on the street, and it was her job to explain to the people in the street who were upset by the filming why we were doing the movie and what it was all about. For the most part, that cooled the street.

**LR:** Tough job.

**SC:** Very tough. She did it wonderfully. But there were times when it didn't work. Baird Bryant, who was the white cameraman (the other cameraman, Leroy Lucas, was black), myself, and the two black kids were on 125th St. right next to a black nationalist bookstore. The owner of the store thought the film was anti-Harlem, and so he started chasing us down the street. Then there were times when crowds collected that were not always friendly. But, in general, we had enough black people on the crew and with Madeleine going around, we were able to work very successfully in the real streets of Harlem.

The look of *The Cool World* is not only authentic but very beautiful and moving since you get a chance to see in a documentary style the real life the children live in ghettos like Harlem. Up until then, no one had shot in Harlem. I think they didn't do it because they thought it was dangerous. They didn't even think it was necessary. Who would be interested? If that hadn't happened, my film would not have been as successful as it was.

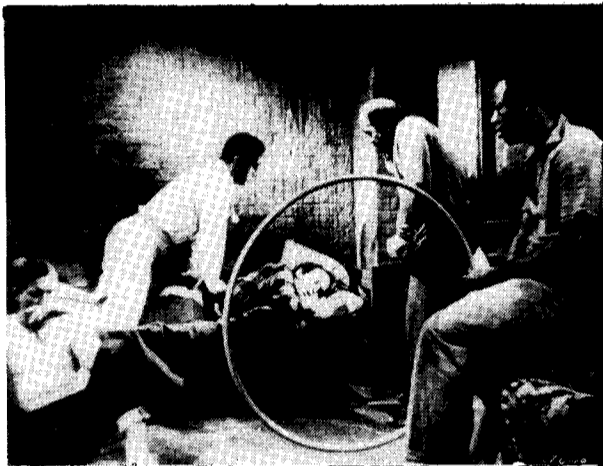
It finally took two years to make that film, and by the end of it we were \$50,000 in debt, which I'm still paying off. I did something that I do all the time. I make terrible financial deals because my interests are basically making the film, and it never occurs to me that I'm going to lose money for other people and that I'm always going to feel very bad about that.

The only film that I don't have any resentments about is *Portrait of Jason* because I put up the original money myself which turned out to be a good investment since it only cost \$10,000. I was given the film stock by NBC. I gave Jason some money, and I made a deal with him that any money I got from the film, half would go to him. To this day, he still gets bits of money. But I don't really know if there are any profits or if I ever got my original money back. But I sure am glad I made the film!

**LR:** Did you make *Portrait of Jason* because Jason seemed like a good interviewee that led to a self-reflexive investigation of cinéma vérité, or was it vice versa?

**SC:** I had the idea for many years of doing a film like *Portrait of Jason* because I was very curious about the whole discussion of documentary and dramatic films and what was truly true. I had a lot of ideas about what was cinéma vérité, what was real, what was documentary, and what was fiction. I wanted to find out if I could find a way to find the truth. My first thought was to do a movie about myself. In other words, I would try to be truthful. But the truth was I knew I couldn't do it. I didn't want to tell the truth at that time. I couldn't even try. Then I looked around at the people I knew, and I thought, "Well, they're very interesting." But either I liked them too much, or I didn't like them enough.

Meanwhile, I had known Jason a long time. He was a friend of Carl's father, the great actor Canada Lee. Jason used to come around and clean up my house when I didn't want him to. I would also give him \$40.00 to help him get on with his career—get costumes or music for his nightclub act. There were times when he was very funny, and there times when he was very cruel and dangerous. We would be sitting around, and he'd suddenly take amyl nitrate and pop it under your nose. I thought I was having a heart attack. I could have killed him. Anyway, I'm walking down the street one day—isn't it wonderful how fate is always there when you need it—and luck somehow took over. There, coming down the opposite side of the street, was Jason. I saw him, and I said, "Yes, that's who I could make the film with." I had not talked to him in several years. But I said, "Hi, Jason," and he almost fell over with joy. I said, "You know, I've got an idea about something. I'd like to film you doing what you do, telling those stories you tell and talking about your life. It would just take one day."



Frame enlargements from *The Connection* (1960).

At the same time, and I think Maya would probably agree, my career was helped a lot by it. It allowed me to be unique, and it allowed me to do things that might not have gotten attention except that I was one of the few women who made films. I was aware of that, and I think I always knew it would be advantageous until it reached this very strange line. Everything was fine so long as I was not really going to take over.

**LR:** Does that apply to your role in Film-Makers Coop?

**SC:** Well, Jonas [Mekas] and I first got the idea in 1960 that we could raise money to make, produce, and distribute independent feature films in New York City. There were about 10 of us, all filmmakers, and we would raise a million dollars. Each one would then get \$100,000 apiece, and each of us could make a feature film. A number of us were already in the middle of doing films. I was doing *The Connection*. Bob Frank had already done *Pull My Daisy* (1959). Lionel Rogosin had done *On the Bowery* (1956). Morris Engel had done *Weddings and Babies* (1958). I got this idea that if we all got together and met, we could make and distribute our own inde-

pendent films. But when push came to shove, none of the filmmakers or their backers were willing to allow this organization to distribute the films. But the people who made short films were willing. So the Film-Makers Cooperative original plan to produce and distribute movies did not take off the ground for features, but it did for short experimental films in 1962.

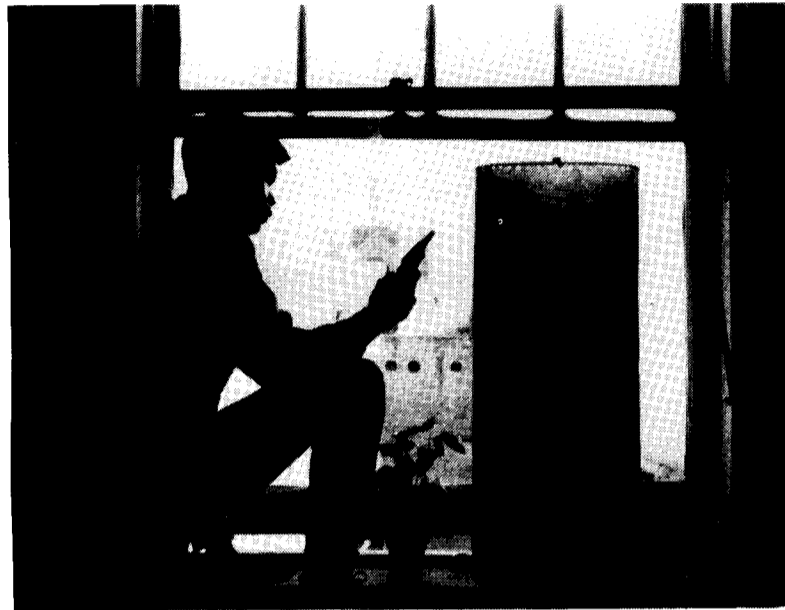
At that point, I only gave money because I had other distributors for my shorts. But on the books, I co-chaired the Coop with Jonas. Each year he would pay me a visit and I would sign a piece of paper for the next year, and I'd give him \$200 to help out. Then five years into it, Jonas came by and said, "It's not legal any more for us to do this. We're going to have to have elections." The Coop was getting mixed up with his film magazine *Film Culture*, and other sorts of crossover things were happening. [In 1963, Clarke, Mekas, and filmmaker Louis Brigante tried again to create an organization to distribute theatrically independent feature films. Film-Makers Distribution Center lasted from 1963 to 1967 and was housed in the same headquarters as Film-Makers Cooperative.]

It's a really strange thing. I'll tell you what happened. During the period that Jonas and I were running Film-Makers Coop and Film-Makers Distribution Center, he was putting together the Anthology Film Archives. Then in 1967 after Film-Makers Distribution Center had folded, I turned around and read in a magazine that Anthology Film Archives had not only officially started but that the list of filmmakers whose work would be in the archive did not include me. It did not include Ed Emshwiler; it did not include Stan VanDerBeek; it did not include Robert Breer. There were a bunch of filmmakers that were excluded, and I got very upset, absolutely furious. I tried to

talk to Jonas about it, and he kept saying, "You don't understand." Meanwhile, the main problem was that the selection committee was five guys, and there was all this animosity going on among the filmmakers as well as a great deal of vying for place. I had a great deal of anger, and there's a part of me that still has it. [At the time of the interview, Clarke had already been invited to speak at a retrospective of her films and video to be sponsored by Anthology Film Archives in December 1981. The event signalled the institution's recognition, if rather belated, of Clarke's filmmaking achievements.]

**LR:** How did you find the novel about Harlem youth gangs for your next film, *The Cool World*?

**SC:** The novel was popular in those days. Fred Wiseman, who had put about \$3,000 into *The Connection*, got hooked into filmmaking. He had read the novel. He came to me, asked if I would be interested in making a film, and I said yes. He thought he could make a deal to pick up *The Cool World*. We went to visit Warren Miller, the author, and he was a wonderful man. He had seen my work. He liked it. But he himself



Left: frame enlargements from *The Cool World* (1963). Right: filming *The Cool World* on the streets of Harlem. Courtesy Walker Art Center.

At that point—and I don't remember exactly how—NBC gave me two or two and a half hour rolls of film stock that had been opened so that they couldn't use them. But they were still good, and the cost of the processing was included. By then I had worked on the Canadian Expo '67 film *Man and the Polar Regions* (1967). [Clarke edited the film which Canadian filmmaker Graeme Ferguson directed for an IMAX system, an enlarged screen process used today chiefly in museums and amusement parks.] As a result, I met an excellent new cameraman, Jeri Sopanen, and that's how I got both the cameraman and the sound man for *Jason*. I had decided to ask Carl to come around because I realized that he and Jason had a relationship between them over the years and that Carl could confront Jason. My role was going to have to be "white lady director."

**LR:** So you did want the confrontation that occurs at the end of the film?

**SC:** Oh yeah. I had every intention of having a climax of something taking place. I knew that I would have to get Jason to face the truth at some point. But I wasn't positive how. In other words, I was going to let Jason do whatever he wanted for as long as I could, and then I was going to challenge him to come clean, tell the truth.

**LR:** Did he know that Carl was going to confront him?

**SC:** I don't know what Jason knows. I would say that he probably did.

**LR:** By the end of the film, the viewer doesn't know what's true, what's acting. That's the issue of the film.

**SC:** Exactly. Jason is a performer, and everything except the last 20 minutes in the film I had seen a hundred times before. I'd heard every story that he told and every variation. I knew that if I asked him X, I would get Y. I knew him that well. An interesting and important fact is that I started that evening with hatred, and there was a part of me that was out to do him in, get back at him, kill him. But as the evening progressed, I went through a change of not wanting to kill him but wanting him to be wonderful. Show him off. I went through getting to love him as I spent months sitting at my editing table trying to

decide which half of what I filmed I was going to drop. I developed more and more of a total ability to understand where he was coming from—leaping cultural gaps, his homosexuality, his opportunism, his hype. I changed a lot of judgemental ideas by really getting to know Jason. By the way, sometimes I still go back to my original thoughts about Jason. But in the process of working on the film, I grew to love him.

**LR:** As a spectator, you go through those extremes, too. When the film really worked for me was where part of the crew is openly confronting this guy who has been laying himself bare except you don't know if it's real or if he's performing. But ultimately, you see the crew verbally torturing him, and then he stops short and says, "Is this good? Is this what you want?" It's startling.

**SC:** Yes, he did what you described. He cries, and then in the middle of his sobbing, he turns it off. I tried to make a good ending, but each time I thought it was over, he would pull back and do another trip on us: "I'm not lying." "Yes I am." You're right, and we are left with nothing else except that particular reality which happens to be Jason.

Jason is not your average human being. I knew that when I chose him I was choosing somebody dramatic, photogenic, crazy, interesting. I did not know how crazy he was, nor did I know that he was probably an alcoholic genius and especially that he was terribly human. Somehow, he ends up the victor. I was perfectly willing for him to win.

**LR:** The film now reminds me a little bit of *Grey Gardens* (1975). *Grey Gardens* is modeled on some of the same premises as *Jason*. It's a cinéma vérité interview, the filmmakers David and Albert Maysles participate in the on-screen activities, and the subject interviewees live in an unorthodox way and are social outsiders. But *Grey Gardens*, unlike *Jason*, exploits its two women characters, Big and Little Edie Bouvier Beale. The Maysles expose their emotional instability, using them as willing victims.

**SC:** Of course they are willing victims. They want to be stars! Everybody does. People want to be in the movies. They don't care. They will totally exploit themselves. The moral issue for

the filmmaker, therefore, becomes an interesting one.

I admire the films of Pennabaker and Rick [Leacock] so much because they have a line, like I hope I have, beyond which they will not go. I will not allow people to exploit themselves if they don't win in the end. In other words, I feel that the film of Jason, aside from being a human document, shows survival, and that's what it's all about—survival. I'm not sure I manipulated Jason, although that issue is certainly raised in the film.

So far as I know, no one has ever suggested that Jason was exploited. As far as I know, there has never been anything written about it that doesn't see *Jason* as an exploration of what makes a particular human being tick. Partly, it's Jason himself, his charm, his sense of humor, and he is also laughing at himself. I didn't take somebody who was easy to destroy. I picked somebody who was going to win. Jason ends up winning in that film.

#### SHIRLEY CLARKE FILMOGRAPHY

*Dance in the Sun* (1953)  
*In Paris Parks* (1954)  
*Bullfight* (1955)  
*A Moment in Love* (1957)  
*Brussels "Loops"* (1958)  
*Bridges-Go-Round* (1958-59)  
*Skyscraper* (1959)  
*A Scary Time* (1960)  
*The Connection* (1960)  
*The Cool World* (1963)  
*Robert Frost: A Lover's Quarrel With the World* (1964)  
*Portrait of Jason* (1967)

#### VIDEOGRAPHY

*Four Journeys into Mystic Time* (1980)  
*Savage Love* (1961)  
*Tongues* (1982)

Frame enlargements from *Portrait of Jason* (1967). Left frame courtesy Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.

