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Ellipsing Time and Space



Boys talk about guns and gangs in Shirley Clarke's *The Cool World*.

BY LISA ROBINSON

Shirley Brimburg Clarke, film/video maker, former dancer and a cult figure from the 60's art scene, made kinetic films that emphasized rhythm and dance, that attempted to open up a world to the viewer through the stripping of day-to-day reality. Her willingness to explore previously untouched terrain both in film medium and film politics made her a leader in the Greenwich Village artistic circle that included filmmakers Maya Deren, Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage as well as one of the most successful independent American filmmakers of the 60's.

Clarke was an activist not only in her provocative films, but also in her work for the advancement of "New American Cinema," a movement in the 60's that called for a political and artistic alternative to Hollywood moviemaking.

From "cine-dance" shorts, in which dance moves serve as a vehicle between two separate spaces, to feature-length films *The Connection* (1961) and *The Cool World* (1963) that explore subculture in a raw and reflexive fashion, Clarke has given her viewers radically new ways of seeing and provided a freshness that most of today's mainstream films lack.

Clarke split long ago with her wealthy Manhattan apartment up-

bringing of nannies and governesses and rarely alludes to the subject. Though she has never

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directly addressed her past in her work, Clarke says she felt the "outcast" at a young age as a "poor-little-rich-girl"—a link that led to her later work with so-called social misfits and underdogs. "What could be interesting about a rich Jewish girl?" says Clarke. "I didn't realize a side of me was coping out. . . I was hiding from myself that there was any pain at all."

Clarke's feelings of 'otherness' began in school. "It was fifth grade before I learned to read, seventh grade before I wrote. All this later turned out to have physical roots, a right-brain-right-handed thing whose name I forget," she explained. "I was the outsider. But the child that observes has many advantages: eventually she identifies with 'out' people."

Throwing herself in to dancing at a young age, Clarke attempted to pursue it as a career but only went as far as several lukewarm

performances in New York. Dance laid the groundwork for film, and her studies with Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey and others—studies that stressed originality, personal expression, rhythm and movement—became integral to her philosophies of life and art.

Clarke shot her first film, *Dance in the Sun* (1953), with a wedding present Bolex and the help of her then-husband Bert. She began by shooting the dance on the beach, but "horrified" with the effects, reshot it in the theater and then intercut the two. As dancer Daniel Nagrin leaps into the air, his motions carry him back and forth between the two realities, ellipsing

Clarke found her own individual "beat" in editing and filming and carried it into other dance films such as *Bullfight* (1955) and *A Moment in Love* (1957). In *Paris Parks* (1954), her second film, she extracts moments of dance from everyday movements of park-play.

The film opens with a young girl (Clarke's daughter Wendy) rolling a hula-hoop into the park and ends with the fall of dusk and the retreat of the families and children behind the "curtain" of darkness. Its unwillingness to form a strict narrative lies more in the genre of documentary, but its charm lies in the choreography of everyday life. The children run and play while the

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old people sit watching—all together in a rhythmic dance of life.

In *Bridges-Go-Round* (1958), bridges wrap themselves in different ways around each other and the viewer. It is "... a dance film by my definition because it denies the reality of a bridge that is built to connect two pieces together and, instead, it looks at bridges as they affect you when you cross them, which gives them movement and design like flying in space."

Clarke's ability to bring elements of dance into all of her films—from overtly cine-dance to rough-edged, raw narrative/documentary style—reinforces her belief that "... dance, as I conceive it, is the nature of a human being."

The filmmaker's fascination with the lives of outcasts came to its first realization with her first feature film, *The Connection* (1961), based on Jack Gelber's play-within-a-play about a group of Greenwich Village junkies waiting for a fix.

Posing as a documentary within a fiction, the film begins with the voice-over of cameraman J.J. Burden explaining that he compiled the footage from what "documentary director" Jim Dunn left behind. What follows is a rough, grainy, intriguing picture in which the cameraman and director are visible and characters look directly into the camera. The results are a satirical comment on the mixed morals involved in the so-called quest for truth and a critique of the medium in which Clarke worked. "Most of my films are messages to other filmmakers about things they do that I question," she explains.

The Cool World (1963), her first film made in Harlem possesses a fictional yet gritty documentary style that focuses on African Americans, an "outcasted" group to which Clarke closely related. "I showed black people's pain when it was really mine," she says. The story centers around Duke Custis, a black teenager who wants to get a gun and become the leader of his gang. Clarke found non-actors to play the parts and the scenes were half improvised, half scripted. Elements of dance can be felt in the movement of the camera, the rhythm of the editing and in the accompanying jazz score.

Although her initial films were impressive and widely acclaimed in the film world, Clarke's first big success was the intense and provocative *Portrait of Jason* (1967). Once more playing with the idea of documentary-verses-reality, Clarke turned the camera to ex-hustler, homosexual Jason Holliday and left it running for 12 hours, stopping only to reload.

The idea of truth is central to the film, and as Clarke and lover Carl Lee question and prompt Jason to continue his storytelling, the idea of accessing truth becomes marred. Jason acts out and recalls past experiences. He continually returns to his hopes of becoming a stand-up comedian. His emotions switch on and off mechanically and change at roller coaster speed. Crying, anger and laughing become blurred as does the question of who is manipulating who.

Clarke admits that when she started filming *Jason*, "I hated him. By the end of the night, I was seeing-sawing. It took me six months for me to edit four hours of film into two, and in working with the footage, I came to love him," she

says. "There is no way for people like us to believe we have something in common with a black homosexual con man who wanted to go on the nightclub stage, but this is very important to me. Watching the film, you get to really know another human being," says Clarke.

After *Portrait of Jason*, Clarke moved on to work in video, which she says brought her back to her reasons for making film art. "Video for me is the closest I've gotten to feeling as good as I felt when I was a dancer," she says. She makes video a part of her everyday life, taping herself walking around a cable-filled apartment as well as everyone who walks in the door.

Clarke produced "Savage/Love" (1981) and "Tongues" (1982), featuring two Sam Shephard monologues performed by Joseph Chaikin. She interprets Chaikin's dialogue through video effects such as overlapping images and freeze framing. As Chaikin dissects his thoughts, Clarke creates and terrorizes his physical image, moving from cool blues to hot reds and reaching a crescendo as his psyche lessens its grip near the edge of madness.

Although Clarke constantly

centers on the "outcast" in her films, she has never dealt directly with her own personal experiences or with those of women. She is reluctant to identify with women as an oppressed group, or to discuss her role as a "woman filmmaker." Only recently has she been willing, and perhaps more able, to give some insight on this issue. "I didn't really have anything burning I wanted to say," Clarke explains of her reticence. "My personal woman's experiences seemed unimportant. Yet by refusing to go deep into my soul, I feel that my work is not really significant. And in that state of mind, I kind of make sure it isn't."

Like most artists, Shirley wants to be loved, but in what she calls a more "dignified" way. "I like being a 'classic' rather than a 'Hollywood' filmmaker," she says. "Like my films, you'll like me. And that to me is a more comfortable way of being liked than in the absolute personal way."

"The Cool Works of Shirley Clarke", a three-part series, begins Oct. 13th at the Pacific Film Archive. Call 642-1124 for more info.



Who's manipulating who? Shirley Clarke constructs a documentary within a fiction on the set of *The Connection*.

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