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Portrait of Jason, A

U.S.A., 1967

Director: Shirley Clarke

Cert—(not yet issued). *dist*—Vaughan-Rogosin Films. *p.c*—Shirley Clarke/Film-makers' Distribution Center. *p*—Shirley Clarke. *improvisation*—Jason Holliday [Aaron Paine]. *ph*—Jeri Sapanen. *ed*—Shirley Clarke. *sd. rec*—Francis Daniel. *p. assistants*—Robert Fiore, Jim Hubbard. *voice*—Shirley Clarke. *with*—Jason Holliday [Aaron Paine]. 9,000 ft. 100 mins.

“Jason Holliday”, real name Aaron Paine, a black homosexual and self-confessed hustler, delivers an extended monologue into camera about his life, goaded by occasional questions and comments from a woman (Shirley Clarke) off-screen and, in the latter part of the film, from a friend called Carl, who has in some way betrayed him. The film is punctuated by brief out of focus close-ups that fade to black, marking breaks for reloading the camera.

Shirley Clarke has said that she made *Jason* as a reply to the *cinéma vérité* techniques of Leacock and Pennebaker. Where their practice is to edit ‘revealing’ highlights from an extensive mass of footage, Clarke has here allowed Jason’s monologue to reach the screen intact and in real time. Clarke sets the camera up to observe Jason—glass in hand, standing, sitting or moving around a living room—from a fixed position that changes slightly after each reloading, with an occasional zoom in for a close-up. As the film progresses, Jason’s personal psychodrama describes a downward curve, from the initial high of his ironic confessions—delivered in the style of an after-dinner raconteur—of life as a Knob Hill ‘houseboy’, through the half-acknowledged self-delusion of his cabaret ambitions and an execrable impersonation of Mae West, to his recollections of a neglected Alabama childhood in an environment of gambling, drinking and hustling. The monologue reaches its nadir in the self-disgust that surfaces in the fragmented revelations of his sexual relationships and essential loneliness. This arch (in both senses of the word) hustler and exploiter is revealed as victim of an exploitative society. As one might expect from Shirley Clarke’s scepticism about notions of veracity and documentary, *A Portrait of Jason* cannot, however, stand as social/political critique pure and simple. And if anything her tactic of presenting Jason’s monologue in ‘real time’ only points up the limitations of film-as-document, revealing the film-making process to be manipulating the reality it records: Jason ‘performs’ to camera. If Jason represents himself as ‘used’ by society he is also undoubtedly ‘used’ by the film to prove a point about the nature of filmed reality, while the viewer is left floundering in an attempt to place the objective reality of the subject’s verbal confessions against the visual reality of his presence and his tense and ambiguously anguished expressions.

VERINA GLAESSNER