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Films of Shirley Clarke

Bridges-Go-Round. By Shirley Clarke from footage shot by Bert and Shirley Clarke for films to be shown at the Brussels Festival. Music: Teo Macero.

Skyscraper. Made by Shirley Clarke in collaboration

with Willard Van Dyke and Irving Jacoby. Music: Teo Macero. Lyrics: Shelton.

A Scary Time. Made by Shirley Clarke in collaboration with Robert Hughes. Sponsored by UNICEF. Music: Peggy Glanville-Hicks.

Shirley Clarke was originally a dancer. Before making films she took the precaution of learning a great deal about film technique; but she remains an instinctual film-maker, whose feeling for movement generally seems to have carried over into her feeling for the camera.

The theme of *Bridges-Go-Round*—as far as words can describe it—is the bridges that link Manhattan to Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and the New Jersey shore. In actuality, the bridges become plastic materials for a highly abstract subjective study in structures and movements. The images were printed “bi-packed”—running sandwiched together through the printer—in order to give them equal intensity. They are manipulated in a complex but extremely arresting way: the great steel girders, the taut cables, the towers and railings and roadways and abutments seem almost to dance. An exciting sense of color works with Mrs. Clarke’s lively rhythmic sense.

One particularly striking shot in *Bridges* is a zoom backward from an automobile moving forward—so that the bridge pillars remain in place but light poles on the periphery of the screen whizz past. The shot effectively confuses one’s ordinary sense of depth perception, and creates a new kind of dynamic and realist equivalent of the stage designer’s forced perspective.

On its simplest level *Skyscraper* is the chronicle of a building, 666 Fifth Avenue, from the time its site is cleared (in New York one must tear down a used building to build a new one) to its ultimate employment as a forty-odd-floor stack of offices. But the film is also a comment on the contrast between the nobility and quietly unconscious heroism of the actual construction workers and the shallow, highly polished routinism for which their labor provides a home. The construction sequences are shot in black and white, but the use sequences go to a kind of neon-red argon-blue Eastmancolor.

The futility of the whole business is suggested by a final long shot of the building: someone has

suggested that it looks like an enormous square bottle of clear blue underarm deodorant. In addition, one might suspect that beneath the genial sound track lies a hint that the construction methods themselves, caught as they are in what used to be called "the cash nexus," show in their clock-punching unhumanity a kind of parallel to the unhuman fate of the building itself.

As in *Bridges*, there is an astonishing lyric quality, even when dealing with mechanical processes. Not only are the shots edited dynamically (there is almost no matched-action photography in the film) but the changes in tempo, the pauses, accelerations, retards, and even visual glissandos—such as a shot looking up an elevator shaft as the elevator ascends—work with a remarkably complex correctness and grace. One is tempted to suggest that, like jazz, *Skyscraper* simply "swings."

The sound treatment consists of off-screen dialogue by the workers and a narration in song. One must also comment on the neat and sometimes terrifying camerawork in the high steel by Kevin Smith—no acrophobe he.

A *Scary Time*, done with Robert Hughes of the UN Film Unit, is as yet unreleased. Dynamic photography and editing are here combined with a kind of movement of ideas. The film deals with the contrast between the mock horror or attempt at horror of American children at

Hallowe'en and the actual horror of children's fates elsewhere in the world. The film was made for theatrical distribution, with the purpose of predisposing the uncommitted to support government contributions to UNICEF or to give individual donations. The linkage of Hallowe'en and the American "trick or treat for UNICEF" campaigns is made quite simply by setting the Hallowe'en experience of American kids, who collect for UNICEF and seem to be oblivious to the meaning of what they're up to, against the actual horror engulfing the children whose faces appear on the UNICEF posters. The non-American footage, single frames of which served to illustrate the posters, was carefully culled from various stock-footage libraries. A triumph of the unique patience and editing skill needed to work from stock footage occurs in a rather long montage of dancing and smiling (the result of donation) edited in a crisp and visually sensible style. The score, this time by Peggy Glanville-Hicks, while a bit too mild for some of the pictures, served well. The film itself is a basically honest approach to a real problem. The final shot of a baby, its face covered with flies, held on the screen for a very long time, is not pretty; neither is it easily forgettable. Neither is the need for which the film was made either pretty or easily forgotten.

Shirley Clarke is soon to begin her first feature film, an adaptation of the controversial off-Broadway play, *The Connection*. This off-Hollywood venture into the genre of the theatrical film by one of our most talented experimentalists will be awaited with the greatest interest.

—HENRY BREITROSE

An example of Kevin Smith's high-steel photography in *SKYSCRAPER*.



Come Back, Africa

Producer-director: Lionel Rogosin. Script: Lionel Rogosin with Lewis N'Kosi and Bloke Modisane. Photography: Emil Knebel and Ernst Artaria. Sound: Walter Wettler. Editor: Carl Lerner. Music Editor: Lucy Brown. Cast: Zachariah, Vinah, Arnold, Aunty, Dube-Dube, Eddy, George, Marumu, Miriam, Morris, Myrtle, Rams, Steven, and the people of Johannesburg.