

## Document Citation

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# THE CONNECTION

Directed by Shirley Clarke. Produced by Shirley Clarke and Lewis Allen. Screenplay by Jack Gelber from his play. Director of photography, Arthur J. Ornitz. Sets designed by Richard Sylbert. Music, Freddie Redd. Presented by the Academy Cinema. American. Cert. X. 16 mins. Leach, WARREN FINNERTY: *Solly*. JEROME RAPHEL: *Sam*. JIM ANDERSON: *Cowboy*. CARL LEE: *Sister Salvation*. BARBARA WINCHESTER: *J. J. Burden*. ROSCOE BROWNE: *Jim Dunn*. WILLIAM REDFIELD: *The Musicians*. Piano, FREDDIE REDD: *Alto Sax*. JACKIE McLEAN: *Bass*. MICHAEL MATTOS: *Drums*. LARRY RITCHIE.

A FILM director, Jim Dunn, is making a documentary about drug addicts; the amiable earnestness of his grey flannel mind conceals his incomprehension of his subjects (or rather objects), whom he alternately bullies and beseeches to "act natural". But they persuade him into trying a fix, when he promptly loses interest in his film, which, it is facetiously alleged, was pieced together by the cameraman.

At first I thought the film was pretending to watch its own gestation so that we should feel like we're in the actual pad, man. But this pseudo-Pirandellism is self-defeating. The screen is a place of the mind and the spectator is present "in" any film from the moment he starts caring what will happen next. All aesthetic hoop-doodoo meant to convince us we are not in a cinema only reminds us we are; and the equivalent of a play which admits it is a play in a theatre, is a film which admits it is a film in a cinema, that is, *either* a filmed interview, *or* (in this case) a film about an intelligent director making the honest film which we see. A film about another film creates no more illusion of reality than a film about a stage show, and only cramps and flattens the inner subject. This film's unusually pedantic pretence of "actuality" only focuses our attention on the quality of pretence—the long takes, the beautiful compositions-in-depth, the clever stage management (all unhip virtues) and too many clangers, e.g. the jazzmen go straight from absolute silence to really groovy stuff without so much as tuning-up, while the cameraman for some mysterious and therefore obtrusive motive never cuts however often the director yells "Cut".

So possibly *The Connection* is also about the disconnection between "them" and "us"—you're either an addict or an outsider and never the twain shall meet; all you can get is teasing glimpses. But the film cheapens this issue of non-communication because Dunn is a hopelessly petulant 'stooge', a young male Aunt Sally representing the earnestness of modern Art. As all the non-junkies are as eccentric as the junkies one guesses this is really a farce, that is, a compassionate *anti-tragedy* about both the addicts and the others. This hipster's in-joke doesn't really facilitate *our* connection.

Gelber's script is constantly peeking over its shoulder at a pseudo-spectator and seems more concerned with what 'we' might think about his characters than with giving us the inside feelings which would alter our thinking. The junkies' taste for snow is compared with society's taste for mushrooms (atomic) and this gawky atmosphere of earnestness inhibits both the comedy and the tragedy. One suspects there is a deliberate parallel between a feeble-minded evangelist, Sister Salvation (Blanche Streetcar forty years on), and the Negro 'pusher', Brother Cowboy, a sinister angel-in-white oddly reminiscent of another Negro bringer of ecstasy, L'Ange Heurtebise in Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poete* (the most persuasive subversion of 'stock responses' to narcotics is of course Cocteau's straightforward autobiography, *Opium*). This film is really about drugs as suicide rather than drugs as ecstasy (i.e. about contracting out of reality altogether, the self-defeating ultimate of 'beat'ness).

It is truest when the people as people prevail over their function as rebellious 'props'. We catch the peculiar combination of lethargy and impatience of waiting for a fix, and (by a rigidly non-subjective, exterior attitude) a sense of the childlike yet grotesquely desperate abandon as the junkies get 'high'. Some of the group shots evoke an inertia compared to which Hamm and Clov are Keystone Cops, and a loneliness by comparison to which the finale of *The Chairs* is community hymn-singing. The characters' nervous tics are not just 'mannerisms' but *stunted actions*: the acting is so good (especially William Redfield's smoothly comic Jim Dunn and Warren Finnerty's leech-like Leach) that whenever a dramatic situation creeps in (unbeknownst to the author) real electricity is created—notably Leach needling the director into trying a 'shot' with what looks like an evil missionary zeal but is probably only a vicarious anticipation of the joys of one's first fix.

*The Connection* needles but we don't get high. Still, it usefully widens the loopholes in our ignorance, and so is worth seeing. In the bigger leagues it is a small success.

RAYMOND DURGNAT