Shirley Clarke was an important figure in the development of American modern dance in the late 1950s and early 1960s. As the only woman filmmaker in European art cinema and the documentary tradition, her work represented an alternative to Hollywood and the development of a commercially viable independent film network. Clarke's efforts broadened and added a new politically relevant cinema that reflected the cultural and societal changes many felt in the 1960s.

In the 1960s, Clarke turned to video. Her award-winning video dance works have been featured in festivals in Los Angeles, New York City, and Japan. Four Journeys within the Frame, building after imagery traces into shadowy processing, layering her images, varying scales of objects manipulates videotechnology like chroma keying and computer manipulation of the televised image itself. Clarke employs video technology like chroma key and computer processing to create new images and new stories, which have evolved from her films into her video work. In the frame, building after imagery traces into shadowy processing, layering her images, varying scales of objects manipulates videotechnology like chroma keying and computer manipulation of the televised image itself. Clarke employs video technology like chroma key and computer processing to create new images and new stories, which have evolved from her films into her video work.

Shirley Clarke: That film got made because Danny Nagrin and his wife Helen Tamiris were friends of mine. Danny Nagrin and Helen Tamiris were leading choreographer/dancers in the development of American modern dance in the late 1940s and early 1950s. I had a Bell & Howell 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 movie was going to be 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 help- ers 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 killed.

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 forth, then you'll know why he's dancing on a beach." Otherwise he looked so petty or pretentious lazing around on the beach in a stylized dance. But if you see that he goes from the stage and I have a shot right 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.

It 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 seems to me a piece 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 came from mashing that very first film. The idea of leaping from the staging and landing on the beach was a revelation to me. I can't forget that every time 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.

That's interesting because one of the major concepts that Maya Duren 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 not sure I can do this (laughs). It just strikes me as a wonderful leap of not only magic but of concept, as a way of encompassing the universe.

Somehow the time and space in film turns out to be rele vant to almost every concept I have about film: how I choose to manipulate 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 Janis with Jason and at 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 a concept in cine-dance? SC: Yes. Bullfight (1955) is a more elaborate attempt to explore a concept in cine-dance.

SC: Well, in many ways that film doesn't really quite work. 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 is killed. The bull was in the original dance, the solo dancer is the bullfighter and the woman watching, and I just added the fact that she was also the bull. I came up with several exciting con cepts for me. I used repetition; I rechoreographed the film. I employed abstract use of color, fast editing, layered images. LR: A Moment in Love (1957) accomplishes all that, for me, it represents an important stylistic departure from Bullfight.

SC: Yes. I started choreographing the camera as well as the dancers in the frame.
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 music 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 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, until 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

LC: 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 Film-makers, 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 cinema 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 him help him on his next project, Sky scraper (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 looked 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 Sky scraper, 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 Ididn’t know what to do with it. I asked if I would take a look.

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

Richard Silber, 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 skyscraper 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 is about alienation, and that was something with which I did identify. Those were the days when I had a deep understanding of the word, 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. As a woman in this world and a woman filmmaker, I know a lot about alienation.

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We agreed that we were always going to present a united front. I knew a lot 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 find thenovel about Harlemyouthgangs for the first time? Did you feel that the novel was popular in those days?

SC: Very tough. She did it wonderfully. But there were times when I didn't feel isolated as a woman filmmaker. I was aware of that, and I think I always knew it would be tough. But I was doing a job that I really wanted to do.

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 no longer 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, 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 Waterfront (1956). Morris Engel had done Weddings and Babes (1956). I got this idea that if we all got together and met, we could make and distribute our own independent 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 of the ground for features, but it did for short experimental films in 1962.

At that point, I only gave money because I had other distributions for my shorts. But on the books, I co-chaired the Coop with Jonas. Every 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, Jonas, 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 Emshwiller; 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 do not participate in the making of the film. He was not even going to see it. When the film was finally made, he didn't come and see it.

I would not have been able to make The Cool World if I hadn't met Jack. [A Harlem-born black actor, Lee had previously been in the stage and film versions of The Connection. He and Clarke had led a short-lived black film company in Harlem, that folded in 1955 after a series of films were shelved because of the lukewarm reception to the first release.] A wonderful how fate is always there when you need it—and I don't think it was just because I was 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 wanted to work on the set except for 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 is about alienation, and that was something with which I did identify. Those were the days when I had a deep understanding of the word, 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. As a woman in this world and a woman filmmaker, I know a lot about alienation. As a woman in this world and a woman filmmaker, I know a lot about alienation.

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We agreed that we were always going to present a united front. 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.
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 Soprenen, and that's how I got both the cameraman and the sound man for Jason. I had decided to ask Carli 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 when part of the crew is openly confronting this guy who has been laying himself bare except you don't know 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.


SC: Yes, it's about love. I didn't take somebody who was easy to direct. 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. 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 cinema 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 woman 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.

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**SHIRLEY CLARKE FILMOGRAPHY**

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

**VIDEOGRAPHY**

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

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