



# NO ANGEL

SHIRLEY CLARKE'S PORTRAIT OF JASON

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BY MAX GOLDBERG

*Noël Burch: Shirley, are you an underground filmmaker?*

*Shirley Clarke: [You] want to start something?*

There may be more revealing exchanges in *Rome Is Burning*, the 1970 portrait of Shirley Clarke that Burch co-directed with André S. Labarthe for *Cinéastes de notre temps*, but nothing that so well encapsulates Clarke's spirited disregard for convention. While Clarke played a key role in American independent cinema's great awakening—she was a signatory of the "Statement for a New American Cinema," a co-founder of the Film-Makers' Cooperative in 1962, and her open defiance of the New York censorship board, who thwarted the initial release of her adaptation of Jack Gelber's *Living Theater* play *The Connection* (1962), energized the burgeoning American Underground movement—she remained something of an avant-garde outlier, her radical curiosity about how the other half lives, and more particularly her complex identification with black men, openly problematizing the Underground's celebration of social outsiders. Always boldly experimental in terms of form—see the gliding long takes vivisecting the junk-

ie's apartment in *The Connection*; the light pastoral touch of *Robert Frost: A Lover's Quarrel with the World* (1963), a gleaming portrait of the poet's twilight years made for public television; the balletic bob and weave through the streets of Harlem in *The Cool World* (1964); the diagnostic, ethically perilous minimalism of *Portrait of Jason* (1967); the densely webbed chronology of *Ornette: Made in America* (1985)—Clarke sought after her subjects by rending documentary and neorealist convention. In each of her films, jarring formal ruptures mirror, or even spur, the concomitant revelation of the socially constructed self.

The last few years have seen a renewed interest in Clarke's filmography, which owes much to "Project Shirley," the restoration initiative undertaken by Milestone's Dennis Doros and Amy Heller, whose dedication to preserving the heritage of American neorealism—already amply displayed in the company's restorations of Lionel Rogosin's *On the Bowery* (1956), Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles* (1961), and Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977)—finds a natural object in Clarke. The re-premiere of *The Connection* at the 2010 Berlinale Forum was followed by restorations of *Ornette* and *Robert Frost*, while the 2013 Berlinale sees the debut of the new *Portrait of Jason*, whose restoration proved especially arduous when it was discovered that the intended source print from the Museum of Modern Art (the basis for an earlier DVD produced by Second Run in the UK) was several generations less than ideal, necessitating Doros to embark on a worldwide search for original elements. (The only Clarke feature not currently on Milestone's restoration slate is *The Cool World*, whose distribution rights are still retained by the film's producer, Frederick Wiseman.)

Shot entirely in the filmmaker's apartment, Clarke conceived *Portrait of Jason* as a literal application of Direct Cinema technique that would function as an auto-critique of the new realism. As the film begins (sans opening credits), speed is called and Clarke gives instructions to roll camera. "Okay Jason, go," she says to her eponymous subject—a black, bespectacled gay NYC hustler with the gift of gab—who comes into view with a couple of kaleidoscopic twists of focus and promptly launches into his repertoire of life stories. That it is in fact a repertoire is clear from Clarke and her partner Carl Lee's off-camera promptings—"Hey Jason, tell that cop story"; "Do the 'I'll never tell' bit." Jason duly obliges, relating his abortive nightclub dreams, hustling exploits, and coming of age with an angry father and a mother who was much loved by white folks because "she knew her place and she stayed in it," while Clarke captures his "confessions" in long takes strategically punctuated by in-camera zooms and racked focus, achieving a seemingly unmediated rawness that, along with Jason's status as a pseudo-celebrity of the downtown scene, calls to mind Warhol's *Screen Tests* of the same period.

Right from the outset, Jason complicates the terms of Direct Cinema's prized authenticity. It's not so much that he performs—Direct Cinema films often focused on celebrity subjects—but that he so brazenly flaunts his dissembling. (After repeating his introduction twice at the outset, he laughs and

reveals that Jason isn't even his real name.) Pausing for a refill or a drag and then launching into the requested monologue as he sashays across the room or splays out on the ground, Jason seems incapable of extemporaneous reflection: every story is done up as a manic stage drama, with little attempt made to disguise exaggerations or contradictions. The very plainness of Jason's fabrications, and his evident lack of concern as to whether the filmmakers (or future audience) believe them or not, is his signal affront to Direct Cinema's earnest belief in the transparency of social reality. "It's a funny feeling having a picture made about you," Jason reflects early on in the proceedings. "I feel sort of grand sitting here carrying on. People are going to be digging you. I'm going to be criticized, I'll be loved or hated or what have you. What difference does it make?" Heedlessly making it up as he goes along, Jason holds up a cracked mirror to the American ideal of self-actualization; he's a veritable object lesson of sociologist Erving Goffman's point in *Frame Analysis* that "What talkers undertake to do is not to provide information to a recipient, but to present dramas to an audience." Or as Jason himself says, "What I really want to do is what I'm doing now...Perform."

Jason laughs hardest when it comes to acting out the explicitly racialized degradations of his hustling life. He describes frying chicken for white matrons and the "white-boy fever" that rules his love affairs. "I have more than one hustle," he explains, and it's a sad list of roles: "I'll come on as a maid, or a butler, or a flunky—anything to keep from punching the clock." Even his Mae West impersonation turns on race, with Jason doubling down on the camp reversal by imitating the actress' preening command to her black maid in 1933's *I'm No Angel* ("Beulah, peel me a grape"). "At bottom," James Baldwin wrote in 1962, "to be colored means that one has been caught in some utterly unbelievable cosmic joke, a joke so hideous and in such bad taste that it defeats all categories and definitions. One's only hope of supporting, to say nothing of surviving, this joke is to flaunt in the teeth of it one's own particular and invincible style." Similarly, for Jason, to be "hip" is to recognize the racial dynamics of a situation and play them to one's advantage—and through this lens, it is in its very failure to locate its subject's "true" self that *Portrait of Jason* attests to a concrete sociological reality. Paradoxically, we get closer to the living truth of Jason as we gradually drop our expectations of ever coming to know him as he "really" is: his performance makes it painfully clear that the necessary duality of deception—someone in the know and someone taken in—can co-exist in a single body.

"They think they're using you," Jason says of his white tricks at one points. "It gets to be kind of a joke...You know, who's using who?" This question goes to the heart of documentary filmmaking, and Clarke's preservation of technical instructions, staging cues, and incidental talk between takes weaves that volatile dynamic into the very fabric of the film. (Some of Jason's remarks boomerang back on the production itself: when he talks about his white psychiatrists' prurient interest in his sexuality, for instance, or when he confides that "People love to see you suffer, believe me.") As the night gets late and sloppy with drink, Jason drops out of his act with increasing

abruptness and Clarke and Lee become increasingly aggressive and, eventually, downright hostile—a deterioration that calls to mind Goffman's observations about such seemingly everyday situations as fittings or sittings for a portrait, where, in response to being constricted to narrowly defined (and frequently false) versions of themselves, people are prone to "flood out" with outbursts of laughter, tears, anger, or panic. This applies to Clarke and Lee as much as it does to Jason, the Direct Cinema contract between the impartial observer and unaffected observed breaking down on both sides of the camera.

The tense closing minutes of *Portrait of Jason* begin with Clarke announcing the final roll of film as if it were last call at a bar, while Lee—who, tellingly, had played hipster ideals of black masculinity in *The Connection* and *The Cool World* (and thereafter in the 1972 *Super Fly*) with as much flourish as Jason's queen—becomes especially venomous in his expressions of disgust for Jason's lying and vampirism. (The fact that Lee was Clarke's ticket into Harlem for *The Cool World*, and that he and Clarke were lovers while they were shooting *Jason*, only further complicates his uncredited role in the film.) For her part, Clarke presses Jason to commit one way or another on his feelings for his mother; when he responds with extravagance rather than sincerity, she says flatly, "You're not suffering." Ever the prima donna, Jason seems to take the insults in stride. The audience, on the other hand, is liable to flinch at the way the film recapitulates the psychological dynamics of hustling: Jason gives the filmmakers what he thinks they want, and they resent him for it. Never one for pallid ambiguities, Clarke allows this moral lapse to register as something sharp, visceral, and bruising, not only openly capsizing the cherished Direct Cinema ethos of non-intervention but also reversing the terms of this *Portrait* altogether: confronted with their subject's seemingly terminal evasiveness, it is the filmmakers who truly reveal themselves in the end.

Late in his life, James Baldwin ruefully reflected that many of his old white lovers were one and the same as the "vigilantes who banded together on weekends to beat faggots up." "I might not have learned this if I had been a white boy," he wrote, "but sometimes a white man will tell a black boy anything, everything, weeping briny tears. He knows that the black boy can never betray him, for no one will believe his testimony." Regardless of whether Jason shared this subtle understanding—and his off-the-cuff observations suggest he did—his performance is that of someone who knows he won't be believed. This alienation is the real subject of *Portrait of Jason*, and contra the more simplistic critiques of Direct Cinema, the film is all the more insightful for so nakedly displaying how the filmmaker's relationship with her subject is, always, socially situated. It is precisely *Portrait of Jason*'s deliberate limitations (moral as well as technical), its status as a self-consciously "problematic" film, that connects it to the masterly film portraiture of Jean Rouch, Claude Lanzmann, Pedro Costa, and others: by unashamedly showing its hand and allowing the filmmakers' open prejudice to dispel the myth of the ascetic, detached observer, it meets the resulting crisis of knowledge head on.

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