THE VAGARIES OF VERITIES:
ON SHIRLEY CLARKE'S PORTRAIT OF JASON
By Melissa Anderson

Grand Marnier is the sponsor of the New York Film Festival. In the spirit of the festival season, Grand Marnier and the Film Society of Lincoln Center have instituted, among others, a Critical Essay Fellowship open to graduate students in the greater New York area. Winner of the third annual competition, as determined by judges Gavin Smith and Genevieve Villaflor, is Melissa Anderson, a Ph.D candidate at CUNY graduate center.

"I AM BLACK. I AM GAY. I AM A PROSTITUTE. I AM JASON," boldly announced flyers covering my college campus in 1989. These laconic yet provocative statements advertised a screening of Portrait of Jason, billed simply as "a film by Shirley Clarke." As this feature documentary unfolded, I became completely mesmerized by Jason, by Clarke's direction, by this one-man tour de force; Portrait of Jason, made in 1967, was simply unlike any film I had ever seen. Admittedly, this ostensibly voyeuristic fascination with the film did not take into account the potential problems of the film itself — namely, the highly charged politics of representation. Clarke was, after all, a relatively affluent white woman aiming her camera at a poor, flamboyant, black, gay man.

Yet considered within what Peggy Phelan has called "the politics of performance," Portrait of Jason, as a document of one man's performance, resonates with other documents of "marginalized" subjects such as photographer Nan Goldin's 1986 Whitney retrospective "I'll Be Your Mirror" and Jennie Livingston's 1991 film Paris is Burning, which chronicles the 1987-89 Harlem drag ball competitions. Goldin, once touted as the doyenne of Manhattan's demimonde, rose to fame in the Eighties as the quintessential chronicler of the lives of junkies, drag queens, and s&m aficionados. Yet two decades before Goldin made celebrities of her marginalized subjects, Shirley Clarke, one of the founding members of the New York indie movement New American Cinema, had focused on urban alienation and marginalized members of American society.

Crucial to an examination and interrogation of Portrait of Jason and its politics of performance and representation is Clarke's role in the American cinéma vérité movement, which began in the early Sixties. Unlike most filmmakers aligned with this movement, Clarke insisted on blurring the lines between documentary and fictional genre. Her insistence upon this obsfuscation is present in all three of her features, which, in addition to Portrait of Jason, include The Connection (61) and The Cool World (63). Clarke herself has said, "There is no real difference between a traditional fiction film and a documentary. I've never made a documentary. There is no such trip." As Lauren Rabinowitz has noted, Clarke's work, particularly Jason, is distinguished by "her assault on the cinéma vérité filmmaker's belief in the natural authority of his or her position," and her interrogation of "the filmmaker's gaze as objective reality." What remains to be seen are the ways in which Jason may or may not be mined in the tricky problems of documenting and representing marginalized subjects. Yet, rather than maligning Shirley Clarke simply because she is a white, heterosexual filmmaker directing a black, gay subject, a more productive analysis of her film would be to tease out the ways in which Portrait of Jason illuminates a black male sexuality that has often been stifled, shut out, or disparaged — and the ways in which Jason may still resonate today.

Prior to her Sixties triptych, Clarke had made a number of experimental works in the Fifties, but she grew increasingly disappointed by the limitations of experimental cinema. Drawn to documentary filmmaking by 1959, she and other members of the New American Cinema were galvanized by the cinematic climate evoked by the French nouvelle vague films, which eschewed the Hollywood production and distribution systems and their attendant aesthetic criteria. In 1960 Clarke began...
work on *The Connection*, her first feature film and first critique of the ostensible objectivity championed by cinéma vérité practitioners. According to Rabinovitz, Clarke especially contested the notion that the camera’s gaze provided psychological insight into the subject, particularly when the subject struggled to maintain her/his dignity before the camera. Countering this logic, Clarke insisted that “the filmmakers themselves ‘naturalized’ such psychological revelation through the narrative (complete with crises) that they edited into their documentaries.”

Briefly, *The Connection*, based on Jack Gelber’s Off-Broadway play within a play produced by the Living Theatre in 1959, is about a white cinéma vérité director named Jim Dunn (played by William Reiff) filming a multicultural group of drug addicts gathered in a seedy Manhattan loft owned by Leach (Warren Finnerty). Anxious and irritable, the junkies await the arrival of Cowboy (played by the African-American actor Carl Lee, who was Clarke’s lover) and his delivery of a package of heroin—the film’s eponymous “connection.”

Although Clarke’s film superficially resembles a vérité-style documentary, *The Connection* is actually a tightly scripted and edited drama—a filmmaking strategy, Rabinovitz suggests, that “expose[s] how cinéma vérité fails as an exposé.” Throughout, Clarke indicts the “reality” of cinéma vérité via the junkie characters’ constant mockery of the aspiring documentary filmmaker Dunn, who plaintively asserts that he just wants to make “an honest, human document.” Dunn’s quest, Clarke implies, is both arrogant and misguided: since the white, bourgeois Dunn will never be able to “know” the lives of his marginalized subjects, he will never be able to portray them with any degree of honesty.

Clarke’s second feature, *The Cool World*, although not as overtly critical of American cinéma vérité, also blurs fictional and documentary strategies. Collaborating with Carl Lee, Clarke shot *The Cool World* entirely on location in Harlem. Basing their film on Warren Miller’s bestselling novel about Harlem teenagers, Clarke and Lee worked and improvised with nonprofessional African-American actors—all from Harlem, the Bronx, or Brooklyn—to “portray the honesty of their experience.”

Ironically, it is precisely Clarke’s desire to portray the honesty of her subjects that muddles the trenchant observations about the fallacies of capturing “truth” and “honesty” so plainly evident in *The Connection*. Film scholar David James has criticized the film’s faked liberal optimism, noting that it was characteristic of the “reformist milieu of the New American Cinema...to exhibit the liberal hope of changing social justice through knowledge and good will.” To Clarke’s credit, however, *The Cool World*—which focuses on a rumble between two rival gangs—does not offer any tidy solutions to the racism endemic in America in the Sixties. One could argue that, via its focus on violence as the only recourse to power for its African-American anti-heroes, the film prefigures a radical discourse on racism (and resistance to racism) that was then in its nascent. Yet ultimately *The Cool World* is flawed by not allowing its African-American characters, per Rabinovitz, “any recourse to successful resistance or opposition.”

Also questionable is Clarke’s glorification of violence as a noble display of hypermasculinity—specifically African-American masculinity.

After a lapse of three years, Clarke began working on her third and final fea-
Portait of Jason; perhaps the most complex of all her critiques of cinéma vérité, was shot in Clarke's living room at the Chelsea Hotel. The 100-minute film was pared down from one continuous twelve-hour take shot with only one camera.
in Portrait of Jason that seem uncomfortably exploitative. Clarke has said that she wanted her film to expose the flaws in her contemporaries’ beliefs about cinéma vérité—could it then be argued that Jason Holiday/Aaron Payne is coldly used by Clarke to prove her ideologies about filmmaking? Furthermore, although Jason is shown throughout to be a cunning manipulator, could one not also assert that there is still an enormous power imbalance between Clarke, who wields the camera, and Jason, who performs for her (and the viewer)? Has Clarke stripped Jason somewhat of his own agency, his own subjectivity? Is the appreciative spectator, enthralled by Jason’s monologues, imitations, and musings, also guilty of denying Jason his own sense of self?

Yet, when we consider Portrait of Jason vis-à-vis the current era of increasingly homogenized “positive” gay and lesbian role models in film, there is something powerful, affirming, and perhaps even confrontational about Jason and his extreme flamboyance in this film. Marlon Riggs’s apostrophe to Jason, quoted at the beginning of this paper, poignantly reclaims Jason Holiday— in all of his effeminacy, outrageous grandeur— as a means to implore the viewer to imagine a pluralistic black male sexuality, one in which the voices of those black men previously stifled, or forgotten, or never heard, will finally be heard and respected. Portrait of Jason, then, can be seen as a document that reanimates the voice of the previously silenced, challenging the spectator to include this voice within the discourses of blackness, maleness, and sexuality.

Finally, if one considers Jason as a player within the “politics of performance,” Portrait of Jason becomes a crystallization of what Peggy Phelan, in her discussion of Paris Is Burning, has called “the endless theatre of everyday life, [one] that determines the real: and this theatricality is soaked through with racial, sexual, and class bias.” In other words, the theatrical nature of Jason’s performance and Portrait of Jason itself does not necessarily invalidate the “realness” or “truth” of Jason’s life. “Real” life itself demands performance, artifice, and mediation; realness of being, then, “is not a static concept—any more than race, sexuality, or identity are static.”

The power of Portrait of Jason lies in its ability to explore the mutable and performative qualities of race, gender, and sexuality.

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left to right: Fellowship winners Melissa Anderson, Kimberley Hassett & Tim Sheehy with fourth generation Marnier family member, Alexandra Marnier-Lapostolle

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Tim Sheehy for his short film TURNSTILE
Kimberley Hassett for her video 27 AMABALA WAY
Melissa Anderson for her essay THE VAGARIES OF VERITIES: ON SHIRLEY CLARKE’S PORTRAIT OF JASON

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