

***The Connection:* innovative filmmaking**

American Film, 1960-Present

Maria Padilha Modesto Mendes Graves

March 17, 2023

The Connection 1961 is a landmark of independent cinema based on an experimental play by Jack Gelber from 1959. A film by Shirley Clarke tells the story of Leach, a heroin addict, and others, including former jazz musicians, who were waiting for a dealer to bring them heroin. *The Connection* explores kinetic camera movement, jazz music, and performance that alludes to theater arts and self contemplating the making of a film. The film includes several meta moments where the characters acknowledge the presence of the camera and the film crew, resignifying the "visible" filmmaking style and reinforcing that anyone can control images to look real. The radical textual position of the film and auto-critique of cinema verite production was highly criticized in America, which perceived the film as a glorification of the use of drugs. In contrast, European critics highly acclaimed the film for its approach to controversial topics and atypical form. While some argue that the film's content and form are politically biased and controversial in its representation, others see it as an innovative and thought-provoking piece of cinema that challenges the authority of images and production through an intersectional and political aesthetic.

The 1960s was a time of many changes and remarkable events that would influence the following decades until today. The counterculture led many young people to reject the mainstream values that led to the rise of the hippie movement, sexual revolution, and drug experimentation. African American were fighting for equal rights and to end segregation, and the feminist movement began to challenge gender roles. Women were no longer restricted to socially old constructions of femininity. The marginal status of cinema allowed great opportunities to many of these new women that played a significant role in independent cinema. On the contrary, Hollywood maintained a restricted perspective regarding form and representation, having men as

the majority in the industry. The production usually represented the white straight men as the status quo.

Avant Garde Filmmakers, including Shirley Clarke, offered an alternative to the mainstream by rejecting the artificiality of Hollywood and exploring cinema as personal expression embedded with social realism and feminist polemic. The movement of New America Cinema that emerged in 1960 was interested in unifying filmmaking activities, distribution, and exhibition by giving lectures, releasing print interviews, and publishing articles and books. Filmmakers often worked with a low budget and were interested in controversial topics, fearless in confronting traditional form and aesthetics. Because they were working with less money than Hollywood productions, they did not have to compromise their work with any investor. Instead, creators could approach their filmmaking in artisanal mode production, addressing social rather than psychological issues¹. Clarke's work in *The Connection* emerges in this context.

The Connection conveys aesthetically elaborate cinematic intersectional elements while addressing social and political consciousness. Intersectionality is an analytic framework willing to understand the complexity and multiple forms of oppression that could intersect one individual. By understanding and analyzing the complex modes and forms cut across an individual, a narrative, or a form of production, scholars can deeply understand the meaning-making of a film. *The Connection* is a film that has at its core the concept of intersectionality. A film that deals with the concept of race, gender, sexuality, and class and how it influences the narrative and experience of the character but also the experience of the

¹ Rabinovitz, Lauren. *Points of Resistance: Women, Power, and Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943–71* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 26.

spectators. In this film, intersectionality is not limited to its content but rather to its structure and form.

The city's landscape is an element of intersectionality that addresses social consciousness. The Connection was shot in an apartment located in New York. Although it appears to be a simple location, New York City seems to allude to something big; Paula J. Massood's a film scholar, a professor of the College of Brooklyn points out,

[...] the city [was] the site of crisscrossing aesthetic, social, economic, and political forces that enabled a young, wealthy dancer and daughter of Jewish immigrants to come into contact with a host of artists, performers, and scholars spanning the spectrum of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class.²

These intensified experiences in urban spaces that intersect individuals' lives daily provided connection and collaboration, elements necessary in making a film. New York City was the home for many writers, painters, filmmakers, and creative people of many nationalities and identities, a cultural center that influenced many movements to sprung, such as the Beat Generation and Abstract Expressionism, and a source of influence to Shiley Clarke. It was also a location of economic and political influence, an environment for many political organizing and civil rights movement demonstrations. Clarke saw the city as an active participant in the action, a space with diverse existences and experiences that sometimes overlapped or contrasted. The city of New York, therefore, is the groundwork for Clarke's exploration as a filmmaker. It is the space in which genre, form, people, and aesthetics can come together.

² Paula J Massood. "BLURRING BOUNDARIES, EXPLORING INTERSECTIONS: Form, Genre, and Space in Shirley Clarke's The Connection." In *Media Crossroads: Intersections of Space and Identity in Screen Cultures*, edited by Paula J. Massood, Angel Daniel Matos, and Pamela Robertson Wojcik, 67–81. Duke University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ft83tw.8>, 68

Dance is a significant element within intersecting aesthetics. Trained by Martha Graham Technique, Clarke saw the importance of others' backgrounds in her film practice. She saw cinema as an art form that all the arts could meet. Paula J. Massood words,

Clarke's ability to transcend genre by making a dance film that was itself a performance piece was also influenced by her kinesthetic understanding of movement and gesture, which contributed to her talent as a film editor.³

Shirley Clarke's dancing background allowed her to approach filmmaking from a unique perspective. *The Connection* is not a cine-dance like some previous works of Clarke, but it still has dance inserted structurally in the form of the film. Clarke's intuitive understanding of cinematic movement through editing created choreographic imagery. In the film, the camera follows the characters as they move through the space, creating a sense of fluidity and rhythm that mirrors the movements of a dancer. In an interview by Janine Bazin and Andre S. Labarthe, Shirley Clarke points out how her dance background was vital to her. She questions the new upcoming generation of filmmakers with no other background besides cinema and what to expect from the new filmmakers.⁴ *The Connection* is a prime example of how her background in dance shaped her aesthetics

³ Paula J Massood. "BLURRING BOUNDARIES, EXPLORING INTERSECTIONS: Form, Genre, and Space in Shirley Clarke's *The Connection*." In *Media Crossroads: Intersections of Space and Identity in Screen Cultures*, edited by Paula J. Massood, Angel Daniel Matos, and Pamela Robertson Wojcik, 67–81. Duke University Press, 2021.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ft83tw.8>, 68

⁴ *Vimeo*, 2023.

https://vimeo.com/20737456?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=1681790.

Furthermore, the music is structurally important and strongly linked with Clarke's political aesthetic. Clarke's editing strategies allude to the nature of improvisation in Jazz. Jazz is an element related to urban African American artistic practices. *The Connection* appears in the film's diegetic world and works as an (in)visible political statement.⁵ The film does not just portray musicians playing music for entertainment and displays an intimate relationship in their lives. Their stigmatized bodies on the screen are politically symbolic and highlight the social and political struggles faced by African Americans in the United States during the 1960s. The film is an invitation to reflect upon the public and health issues regarding drug abuse among marginalized peoples. A moment of pause happens in the film when a man appears with a suitcase. He entered and plugged it into a lightbulb. The people in the apartment hear the music of Charlie Parker, the creator of bebop, also a symbol that alludes to a highly creative moment of African American music. Bebop challenges the idea of music as mere entertainment. Similarly, *The Connection* denies film production as a mere product of consumption. It instead invites the audience to feel a visceral experience.

The Connection can not be dissociated from Living Theatre and performance art. The play's original text from 1959 by Gelber challenges the boundaries of reality and fiction, causing the possibility to disorient the viewers while commenting on the ability of the Living Theatre production. Clarke's adaptation offers the same ideals regarding cinema's ability. A play about making a play in which the fourth wall appears, and disappears becomes a film of making a documentary film. The play producer becomes the director, and the writer becomes the

⁵ Paula J Massood. "BLURRING BOUNDARIES, EXPLORING INTERSECTIONS: Form, Genre, and Space in Shirley Clarke's *The Connection*." In *Media Crossroads: Intersections of Space and Identity in Screen Cultures*, edited by Paula J. Massood, Angel Daniel Matos, and Pamela Robertson Wojcik, 67–81. Duke University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ft83tw.8>, 70

cinematographer in the narrative. To a greater extent, the film has inherited a similar confusion from the play between reality and fiction, deeply grounded in the acting style. The story develops around the combination of embodied actions and extratextual actions. As Angelos Koutsourakis says,

Embedded in this confusion between illusion and reality was a willingness to involve the audience in a more productive way that would not follow bourgeois theatre's reduction of the spectator to a consumer of an action. In this context, performance was not reduced to a secondary status for the reproduction of a text, but as a means of exploring the boundaries between inside and outside.⁶

The performative exploration of the text within a spatiotemporal element of cinema advances in intentional shifts between character and actor, reality and performance. Clarke mimicked a theatrical convention of meta-performance, a technique employed by post-Brechtian Living Theatre that valorizes the act of showing an action rather than imitating it. The acting style draws the audience inside the narrative.

The Connection exposes how an image and narrative can be manipulated through a structural power. By adhering to conventions of cinema verite such as high contrast images, handheld camera, fast black-and-white stocks, setting, character, action, and temporal development, *The Connection* evokes a political premise radicalizing objective authority of the images. Cinema Verite is a style that aims to show the truth and display interaction between the filmmaker and the subject, even if provocatively. The filmmaker appears as a rhetorical authority in terms of apparatus and author. Shirley Clarke's betrayal of cinema verite reveals her criticism of this school of cinema that aimed to show real life. Clarke's points rely on the fact that every

⁶ Angelos Koutsourakis (2011) From post-Brechtian performance to post-Brechtian cinema: BEBB, BRUCE. "The Many Media of Shirley Clarke." *Journal of the University Film and Video Association* 34, no. 2 (1982): 3–8. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20686887>, 143

choice of the filmmakers challenges showing a transparent reality, the choices of angles or camera movement, editing, and so on. Consequently, Laura Rabinovitz asserts,

Her [Clarke's] assault on the cinema verite filmmakers' challenge the patriarchal nature of the cinematic gaze. By challenging the inscription of the filmmaker's objective reality, Clarke began to address the politics of image construction and to show how image production itself may become conflated with the production of meaning.⁷

The Connection is a film that appears to be a cinema verite documentary but is highly scripted and edited. Clarke's choice of production or form allows her to adopt radical positions on political or social issues that otherwise would be impossible in the realism of Hollywood. The Connection refused any possibility of intuitive objectivity because it focused on the inherent subjectivity of the cinematic process itself. Everything depends upon the filmmaker's condition to see or frame.

The film radicalizes the audience's experience. The display of marginalized people on the screen subverts power structures in the cinematic world, raising questions regarding representativity. The spectator is supposed to see everything through the perspective of Jim Dum, the white bourgeois director, or the camera African-American, middle-class assistant. The camera is not just recording equipment but acquires a performative role or extension of spectacle. Rabinovitz states,

The second camera often appears to our field of view as a representation of the apparatus that mediates the production of meaning even though it also controls the pro-filmic event is the subjective point of view of the director or the camera operator.⁸

⁷ Rabinovitz, Lauren. *Points of Resistance: Women, Power, and Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943–71* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 112.

⁸ Rabinovitz, Lauren. *Points of Resistance: Women, Power, and Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943–71* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 115

This subjectivity of the formation of the frame exposes the relationship of the filmmaker's privileged rhetorical position within the film. The camera is not a mere window that the spectator gazes from far away. In *The Connection*, a camera is a tangible object that causes a reaction within the narrative and in the spectator world. Throughout the film, the actions of the junkies are constantly interrupted by the director of the documentary, Dumn, who keeps asking them to act naturally. He then pans the camera and moves around the apartment, trying to mobilize some action. As the junkies notice the camera, they address it, increasing their performance. One of them even asks Dumn what he wants to hear. Ultimately, anyone can manipulate images and narratives to make them appear real. The audience is watching the actors talk directly to them. The camera addresses the sense of immediacy to the viewer's experience giving voice to a group of people excluded from the mainstream.

Others may object to the idea that *The Connection* is controversial regarding representativity. The subversive film form that criticized the objective authority of images gave Clarke grounds to develop politically and aesthetically, representing a part of the society often not portrayed by the mainstream. Nevertheless, what could be seen as revolutionary for some could be considered controversial by others. According to the scholar Tina Campt, black people have historically been submitted to the white gaze, highly objectified, misrepresented, and excluded from the mainstream. She argues that the Black gaze is not simply a matter of representing Black subjects in art but rather a mode of looking at the experiences and perspectives that inform that of Black people.⁹ *The Connection* is a film made by a white

⁹ Tina M. Campt. *A Black Gaze : Artists Changing How We See*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021.
<https://search-ebscohost-com.oca.ucsc.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2681792&site=ehost-live>, 7.

woman. Therefore it is a white gaze at work. However, it also can work as a subversion of the white gaze. Even though directed by a white woman, the film is based on a play by a Black writer, Jack Gelber, with actors predominantly Black. By centering the experiences and perspectives of Black people, Clarke creates new possibilities for seeing and understanding the world of black people.

The film is significant to American Independent cinema for its reflexivity and intersectionality. The subversion of form challenges power structures and the objective authority of images in the cinematic industry. It is approaching tackling drug addiction, its meta moments, and the intersectional and political aesthetic used in its production broke new ground and inspired future filmmakers to take risks and experiment with form and content. Clarke enhances the reality of groups that otherwise would not be on the screen. The direct knowledge of the audience, the viewers, put the spectatorship part of the experience. Although controversial, *The Connection* highlights the complex ways race and representation intersect and the ongoing struggle for Black people to control their narratives in the media instead of perpetuating stereotypes from the massive mainstream. *The Connection* is a realistic performative experience embedded with music and dance editing, evoking political and social awareness.

Bibliography:

Angelos Koutsourakis (2011) From post-Brechtian performance to post-Brechtian cinema:

BEBB, BRUCE. "The Many Media of Shirley Clarke." *Journal of the University Film and Video Association* 34, no. 2 (1982): 3–8. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20686887>.

Clarke, Shirley. "Teaching Filmmaking Creatively." *Journal of the University Film Producers Association* 17, no. 3 (1965): 6–14. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20686782>.

Massood, Paula J. "BLURRING BOUNDARIES, EXPLORING INTERSECTIONS: Form, Genre, and Space in Shirley Clarke's *The Connection*." In *Media Crossroads: Intersections of Space and Identity in Screen Cultures*, edited by Paula J. Massood, Angel Daniel Matos, and Pamela Robertson Wojcik, 67–81. Duke University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ft83tw.8>.

Rabinovitz, Lauren. *Points of Resistance: Women, Power, and Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943–71* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

Shirley Clarke's adaptation of The Living Theatre's production of *The Connection*, *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 7:2, 141-154. http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/padm.7.2.141_1

Tina M. Campt. *A Black Gaze : Artists Changing How We See*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021. <https://search-ebscohost-com.oca.ucsc.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2681792&site=ehost-live>.

Vimeo, 2023.

https://vimeo.com/20737456?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=1681790.

Wright, Basil, and Arlene Croce. *Film Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1962): 41–45.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/1211188>.