

Nilsen, Sarah, University of Vermont. “The Visual Jazz of Shirley Clarke and D.A. Pennebaker: Avant-Garde Cinema and the Department of State”

The Eisenhower administration’s eager appropriation of the arts as a central component of their cultural diplomacy strategies included Abstract Expressionism and jazz, but avant-garde film was also brought on board in order to express the individualism and freedom offered under the American system. Both Shirley Clarke and D.A. Pennebaker were commissioned, at the start of their careers, to produce short loop films for the American pavilion at the Brussels World’s Fair of 1958. Projected on television monitors scattered throughout the pavilion, the films were meant to represent fragments of American life. Racial tensions in the United States and, in particular, the international controversy and negative publicity generated by the desegregation crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas, created one of the major sources of anti-American sentiment at the fair. “The Unfinished Business” exhibit directly addressed racial inequality in America, but was removed following vociferous complaints from American visitors and politicians. The only remaining images of African-Americans in the pavilion could be found in the short experimental loop films produced specifically for the fair that included images of racial diversity and ethnicity. The films were silent and non-linear montages, thematically structured and edited in Clarke’s “visual jazz” style.

Audience studies conducted at the fair revealed that the most popular loop films were those that articulated the dominant mainstream conceptions of America as a white, suburban, middle class society based on “melting pot” assimilation and gendered consumption. The more formally experimental and non-representational loop films left viewers mystified and resistant. The spontaneous individuality of the experimental and avant-garde films did not seem to find an audience among Europeans, and themes of racial inequality and unrest were too difficult to assimilate into the soft sell image of American consumerism that proliferated throughout the pavilion.

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