We have today a vast and detailed record of the past century preserved on film. Yet there are absences in this record, some of which do damage to our historical consciousness and ability to learn from the past.¹ Thousands of films are simply gone, either destroyed or never preserved.² In other cases, films are absent because public access to them is restricted, constituting an antidemocratic withholding of potential historical knowledge and understanding. The unjustifiably limited distribution of *The Cool World* (Shirley Clarke, 1963) is one example. The film tells the story of Richard “Duke” Custis (Hampton Clanton), a Black teenage boy living in Harlem, whose only


goal is to acquire a gun so that he can become the leader of his gang, thereby attaining respect from his peers. His desire for some form of power within a racist context that has denied him any is presented in the film as both reasonable and tragic. More importantly than its specific content, however, it was one of the first films shot on location in Harlem, its cast included numerous non-professional actors who lived in Harlem, and it modeled a cross-cultural (or at least subcultural) collaborative form of filmmaking long before that was a defined concept or practice. Of the approximately 126 US feature films released in 1963, *The Cool World* was the only US film directed by a woman, and it is listed on the Library of Congress’s National Film Registry, which was founded in 1988 “to ensure the survival, conservation and increased public availability of America’s film heritage.” Despite all these important credentials, access to *The Cool World* is extremely limited.

Notably, *The Cool World* was produced entirely outside the auspices of the Hollywood studios. Although directed and edited by Clarke, the film was produced by Frederick Wiseman, who financed the film by recruiting numerous small investors (the same way Broadway plays are often financed). As a result, Wiseman’s production company Zipporah Films owns the rights to the film. Currently, Zipporah Films rents a VHS tape or 16mm print for educational purposes, including public performance rights, for $400. The Library of Congress holds the original negative and will rent a 35mm print to those who can show it. For those who do not have access to a film projector or a VHS player or $400, an illegal, bootleg version of the film circulates as a digital file, but its sound and image quality are low, and yellow French subtitles are burned into the file. When I asked Zipporah Films why the film has not been digitized, I was informed that they “have not had the financial resources to digitize the film yet since we are currently working on digitizing the other Wiseman films that are not available in DCP [Digital Cinema Package].” If the issue is indeed simply one of money, the Library of Congress or a private donor should step in and fund the digitization. Here are the reasons why.

*The Cool World* was an important early instance of collaborative filmmaking across racial lines, and its production history offers important lessons for negotiating the complexities of such collaboration. It was the first feature film not only to be shot on location in Harlem but also with a multi-racial crew and a cast that employed many non-professional Black actors living in that neighborhood, including the teenage star Hampton Clanton. Indeed, this film was an unprecedented collaborative project involving numerous people of diverse backgrounds at different stages in the film’s realization. It was, moreover, a radical act for a Jewish woman in 1963 to transform a novel about Harlem written by a white man (Warren Miller) into a film script in close collaboration with a Black man (Carl Lee), with major roles cast and

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performed by actual Black Harlem residents. And, as Black writer and activist June Jordan, who worked as an assistant to Wiseman on the film, puts it, it was “the only feature film about what it means to be Black in a racist white country from 1954 to 1964 that [she could] recall.”

However, the production history of the film is also evidence of the incredible difficulty of cross-cultural, cross-racial collaboration, a project that continues to challenge filmmakers today. Indeed, Jordan was deeply conflicted about the production. In an essay called “Testimony,” she demonstrates through a montage of quotations from Clanton and the mostly white film crew that Clanton’s experience of the film—and his sense of its relation to actual Black life in Harlem—was quite distinct from that of the filmmakers and that the divide between them could not be fully surmounted. Nevertheless, Jordan regarded the film as extremely important. She writes, “That had been my goal: to get the film out, to see through birth some version of the truth of this Black and white experiment. We were all exhausted. But that felt fine: At least we had tried hard to show something real about Black life in this country.” The attempt, in short, to do something so unusual—a cinematic collaboration among Black and white people trying to convey something true—was valuable in itself.

The initial, contradictory reception of The Cool World also offers insight into ongoing debates about authenticity and representation. For instance, the question of who can narrate Black experience is integral to any understanding of The Cool World, beginning with Miller’s 1959 novel. The novel’s focalization through the experiences of a Black teenager was evaluated in vastly different ways by readers of that era, including different Black readers. The novel was seen by some Black critics as a gifted articulation of Black experience based on close observation and listening by a white outsider who lived in Harlem for many years. According to Jordan, “Warren Miller’s Duke Custis spoke his mind and his dreams in some of the most beautiful and rhythmic sentences ever printed. Miller happened to have been a writer gifted with an extraordinary, accurate, and willing ear.” In a similar vein, James Baldwin writes, “I consider it a tribute to Warren Miller, whose name was unfamiliar to me, that I could not be certain when I had read his book, whether he was white or black. I was certain, however, that I had just read one of the finest novels about Harlem that had ever come my way. The author had obviously looked at something very hard. He had felt it very deeply and was trying to tell the truth about it.” Jordan and Baldwin were conscious of the fact that Miller was white but clearly felt that he had nonetheless captured something true. Yet the accolades for the novel among Black intellectuals were not unanimous. Albert Murray regarded the novel as a form of literary “blackface”

and referred to Miller as a “white negro” who understood nothing about what it meant to be Black in Harlem.12

The film also generated important debate among Black critics about its relationship to lived truth. Alongside his critique of the novel, Murray was dismissive of the film, describing it as “a deadly serious avant garde propaganda film, which has been generally dismissed as Art but praised as realistic documentation.”13 Murray was contemptuous above all of the film’s experimental form, its didactic intent, and its reception as “documentation,” which suggests that he feared the film had been taken by some as real rather than a constructed fiction with a particular point of view. Film writer, programmer, and professor Alfred Johnson took a different tack, writing, “For all its brusque cutting, disjointed narrative, and frustrating half-glances at its characters, this is the most important film document about Negro life in Harlem to have been made so far.”14 In contrast to Murray, Johnson valued the documentary aspect of the film, its interest in the space of Harlem itself. He continues, “Clarke is as interested in the streets, buildings, backyards, and faces of Harlem as she is in her misguided young hero . . . which make The Cool World a work of visual poetry, and in sound, a tone poem of the slums.”15 Where Murray saw propaganda, Johnson found poetry—two vastly different readings of the same film by two brilliant Black minds of the time. Meanwhile, James Farmer, national director of the Congress of Racial Equality, was even more explicit than Johnson in his praise for the film. He writes, “The Cool World is as shocking as the truth: It is the truth. And I sincerely hope that this entire country will be its audience.”16 Sidestepping debates about the relationship between art and reality, Farmer saw the film pragmatically: as having the potential to shock audiences into social justice action.

Indeed, another aspect of the film that deserves attention is its impossible address. Christopher Sieving notes that the intended purpose of both the novel and film was to try to make white people in the supposedly progressive North own their responsibility for the ways many Black people were forced to live. Sieving writes, “Of primary interest to Miller was the producing of a document that would move people to ‘do something’ about conditions in the ghetto and to recognize the roots of those conditions in ‘the way all of us live.’ The screen adaptation of Miller’s novel was evidently undertaken in the same missionary spirit.”17 At the time of its release, Johnson explicitly took note of the film’s complicated address. He writes, “To Negro audiences, these lessons and images are not new . . . but to white audiences, wherever The Cool World is shown, the beautifully observed vignettes of Negroes

living calmly in an unnatural habitat . . . these are etchings of cinematic truthfulness.” 18 In other words, although he found no revelations for Black audiences, Johnson saw a truth about Harlem that had not been conveyed to white audiences before that time. Ironically, however, white audiences were largely uninterested in the film. Sieving notes that “Shirley Clarke's unique achievement was that she made a black film for the purpose of transforming white consciousness. The problem for The Cool World's producers during the marketing stage lay in the task of bringing that white audience, which had never shown any interest in naturalistic cinematic representations of black American life, to the theaters.” 19 The Cool World's address of the white viewer who sees what Black life in Harlem is really like and decides to do something about it constitutes this film as a noble failure because this absent subject never arrives to be moved. In other words, the film was intended as a catalyst to social justice action on the part of white audiences, who, for the most part, did not show up.

It also matters that The Cool World was made by a woman and is a crucial text in the history of women's filmmaking. Produced at a time when most women on set were limited to auxiliary roles, The Cool World, Clarke's second feature, tackled the most contentious social issues of the time. If only for this reason the film should be widely seen and viewed as a rare example of a female director-editor making a socially and politically engaged feature film in the United States outside of the commercial Hollywood system in the 1960s.

Clarke was a dancer who began her film career by making dance films, developing an editing style based in her deep knowledge of rhythm and choreography. Soon thereafter, she signed the Declaration of the New American Cinema Group, a radical independent filmmaking manifesto in line with those of the New Wave movements in Europe and became a founding member of the Film-Makers’ Cooperative, which created a film distribution network for independent films. 20 Her first feature film, The Connection (1961), is a self-reflexive mockumentary-style critique of the ethics of the newly ascendant direct cinema documentary movement; she may have been the first to see and articulate its greatest potential pitfalls, including the potential exploitation of documentary subjects in the name of producing truth (and drama). Her participation in these highly male spaces, movements, and debates was an act of courage and defiance that has become difficult to fully appreciate precisely because she helped lay the groundwork for our current gender paradigm in which women’s leadership roles in film are more common, if still limited.

Despite some meaningful differences, the context in which The Cool World was made and released is depressingly, maddeningly like our own.

Clarke’s film premiered in July 1964, the day before protests broke out in response to the police killing of fifteen-year-old James Powell in Harlem. The resulting Harlem protests of 1964 were not only about police violence against Black citizens, including children, but also about inadequate and poorly maintained housing, subpar schools, and false political promises. These problems remain unsolved today. As a fiction film steeped in documentary elements, *The Cool World* offers oblique traces now of what it was like to live in the Harlem ghetto just as civil discontent was rising to a boil. Clarke was a white filmmaker who in the 1960s believed that Black lives mattered and committed her filmmaking practice to demonstrating this fact to white audiences. She was an early fighter in the effort for racial justice still underway. Examining Clarke’s efforts in the 1960s, however successful or flawed, may yet yield insight to those currently working for social justice in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, a critical reason why the film should be easily accessible. Moreover, beyond its potential political utility, *The Cool World* is a unique document of Harlem at a particular moment in time. The people in the candid street footage may be someone’s father or grandmother or long dead aunt just waiting to be recognized. New generations of viewers deserve to encounter *The Cool World*. Who knows what we might see that has so far been overlooked—and what we might do with that knowledge.

**Jaimie Baron** is a writer, editor, curator, and theorist. She is the author of two books, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (Routledge, 2014) and *Reuse, Misuse, Abuse: The Ethics of Audiovisual Appropriation in the Digital Era* (Rutgers University Press, 2020), as well as numerous journal articles and book chapters. She is the director of the Festival of (In)appropriation and co-editor of the Docalogue website and book series.