Steve McQueen: Whitney Museum of American Art New York

In the dual-screen version presented at the Whitney, End Credits’ three components involve these separate chronologies. As consecutive pages from two separate portions of Robeson’s file scroll across each screen, a bit too quickly to be completely taken in, one hears voice reading files from a third portion of the dossier word for word, not failing to note the frequent blacking-out of names. Visually, these thick lines add an element of abstraction, while the spoken text read aloud functions as a drumbeat. The information is cubed. One might hear words from a field report submitted in 1949 while looking at documents dated 1960 or 1956. (Actually, given the FBI’s propensity to reissue older reports, the chronology is even more complicated.)

FBI files themselves are at once fascinating and boring, as well as frustrating. Pages are cross-referenced, scribbled on, stamped, or marked deleted. Robeson’s files offer a weirdly celebrity-stalker view of his life. They are mainly descriptions of concerts given or parties attended at Eastern Bloc embassies; these are annotated by articles clipped from the Daily Worker and hate mail denouncing Robeson and associates as “reds,” “commies,” and “dogs in uniform.”

Mostly the “credits” are actual credits. The file documents Robeson’s support for various left-wing organizations, including the American Pugilist Committee, the Conference on Puerto Rico’s Right to Freedom, the Committee to End Jim Crow in Baseball, the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, and the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, to name only a few. Reading between the lines, one can see suggestions of extramarital affairs. More overt and dramatic is the ongoing saga of the government’s renewal to renew Robeson’s passport.

Robeson was a suspect without a crime, unless, as noted by film scholar Ed Guerrero, it was the way in which his “articulation of fame challenged the rigid barriers of stereotype and questioned the ‘place’ of all blacks.” For Robeson’s harassment was existent.

Shown last spring, End Credits amplified two overlapping Whitney exhibitions: “Laura Poitras: Astro Noise” and “Human Interest: Portraits from the Whitney’s Collection.” Like the artworks in “Human Interest,” which included an Edward Steichen photo of Robeson, End Credits is a portrait, albeit a uniquely bureaucratic one, like the Poitras show, End Credits is largely concerned with government surveillance, however low key. Poitras is preoccupied with her own surveillance, as well as with the museumgoer’s. The material in End Credits attests to Robeson’s alone. It seems enough to drive someone mad—and, eventually, it very nearly did. In the preface to a collection of Kafka’s professional prose (Franz Kafka: The Office Writings [2009]), the book’s editors describe bureaucracy as being characterized by the “absorption of the individual into hierarchies he does not see for the pursuit of goals he cannot know.”

Although its original version was completed earlier, End Credits can be seen as a sequel to McQueen’s 2013 feature 12 Years a Slave. (Robeson’s father, Reverend William Drew Robeson, was born into slavery and successfully escaped from a North Carolina plantation in 1860.) End Credits can be seen as a sequel to McQueen’s 12 Years a Slave.

But rather than physical, the anguish it represents is purely mental.

While McQueen’s early video pieces often focused on the body (in many cases his own), his movies, Hunger (2008), Shame (2012), and 12 Years a Slave, which has a trampier narrative that plunges viewers into a nightmare of dehumanization, is also a work of literary modernism that evokes the destruction of meaning. So, too, End Credits. Robeson is deprived of his thoughts, his personalhood, and his voice. All that remains is a dossier, evidence that the government found him a person of interest. He is the shadow cast by his file.

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