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Steve McQueen

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART,
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J. Hoberman

FIRST EXHIBITED as a six-hour, single-channel projection in 2012, Steve McQueen's *End Credits* was recently installed at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (with an expanded running time of nearly thirteen hours) on two large screens facing each other across a space nearly three-quarters the length of a football field.

The work's title suggests the stately, somewhat enigmatic list of names and job titles projected at the end of a movie while audiences customarily exit the theater, but here the continuously scrolling text's subject is the scholar, athlete, actor, singer, political activist, and international icon Paul Robeson—or rather, Robeson as refracted through his voluminous FBI file, which was opened in 1941 and, having a life of its own, remained active even after his death in 1976.

To make this piece, McQueen scanned Robeson's file, declassified in 1980 in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act, and then recorded actors reading excerpts. The spectator's freedom of information was made material via the gallery's movable Lucite stools clustered around the imaginary fifty-yard line; one's attention, if not necessarily one's physical being, shuttled back and forth between what might best be described as two images of information.

End Credits turns Robeson's file into a movie and the movie into an object, but it is not the first artwork to feature FOIA material. Margia Kramer's 1981 installation *The Media Matrix* and the Jean Seberg Story and her 1988 publication *Andy Warhol et al.: The FBI File on Andy Warhol* are exemplary precursors.

In the dual-screen version presented at the Whitney, *End Credits*'s three components involve three separate chronologies. As consecutive pages from two separate portions of Robeson's file scroll across either screen, a bit too quickly to be completely taken in, one hears voices 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 term *redacted* 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 reinsert 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 Pushkin 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 refusal 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 existential.

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-tech.

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

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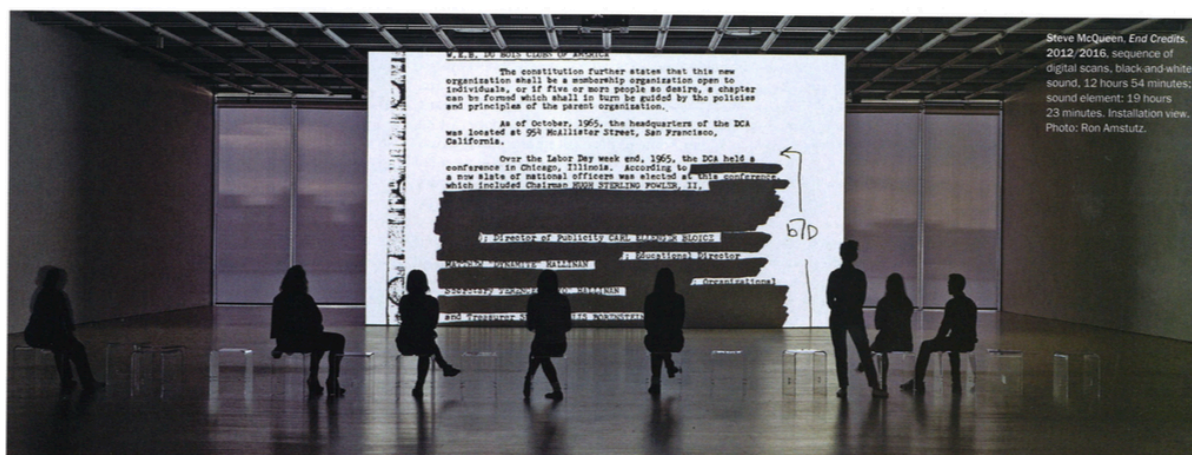
at the age of fifteen.) Like *12 Years a Slave*, *End Credits* is the adaptation of a historical text. But rather than physical, the anguish it represents is purely mental.

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*, offer extreme experience as a subject for contemplation. But *12 Years a Slave*, which has a trapdoor 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 personhood, 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. □

J. HOBEBMAN IS A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO ARTFORUM.

Visit our archive at Artforum.com for reviews of Steve McQueen's feature films *Hunger*, *Shame*, and *12 Years a Slave* by Brian O'Doherty, James Quandt, and Melissa Anderson, respectively.



Steve McQueen. *End Credits*. 2012/2016. Sequence of digital scans, black-and-white, sound, 12 hours 54 minutes; sound element: 19 hours 23 minutes. Installation view. Photo: Ron Amstutz.