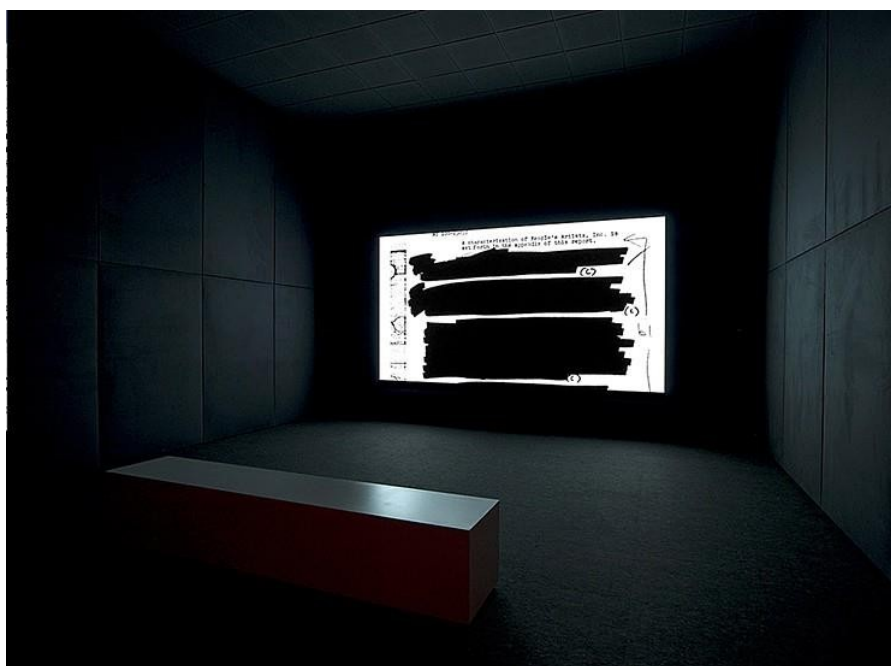


## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

King, Danny. 'Steve McQueen Uses FBI Files to Capture the Oppression of Surveillance'. *The Village Voice Online*. 3 May 2016



### Steve McQueen Uses FBI Files to Capture the Oppression of Surveillance



Declassified documents in McQueen's End Credits  
Courtesy Steve McQueen/Thomas Dane Gallery, London/Marian Goodman Gallery

In 1947, Paul Robeson was one of the most outspoken celebrities alive. A six-foot-three ex-athlete with a distinguished scholarly record and a resoundingly popular acting career — his "Ol' Man River" in Show Boat was the bass heard 'round the world — Robeson was also a pronounced left-wing activist whose pro-Russian sympathies hindered his employability and sent waves of panic through the upper tiers of American leadership. In a U.S. government memorandum that same year, a special agent stationed in Honolulu wrote tersely to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover: "This is to advise that ROBESON did not visit the Territory of Hawaii as he was reported to have been considering."

These now-declassified FBI documents pertaining to Robeson — many containing equally humdrum observations — form the basis for End Credits, a 2012 piece that filmmaker Steve McQueen has now expanded and adapted to be the concluding entry in the Whitney's "Open Plan" series. Taking over the museum's 18,200-square-foot fifth floor, McQueen outfits the space with see-through stools and two imposing, floor-to-ceiling screens.

On each of the screens, and with the assistance of two voices (one male, one female) emanating from ceiling speakers, the FBI files scroll past at a constant clip. The pages overflow with information: stamps, signatures, Daily Worker quotes, newspaper clippings attesting to Robeson's fight for anti-lynching legislation. Chunks of text have been blacked out to protect the identity of "confidential informants" of "known reliability." For a liberal-leaning entertainer in midcentury America, this level of authorized surveillance was far from unusual, but it's nauseating to see the proof of that paranoia — the abundant records the FBI kept on Robeson's wife, Essie, for instance — blown up to grand proportion, a nightmare of banal ink on paper.

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For McQueen, an artist long preoccupied with the human form, this installation of paper documents presents a challenge. His feature films have explored political anger and strife through violations of the body: In *Hunger* (2008), it's there in the terrifyingly thin form of hunger-striker Bobby Sands (Michael Fassbender) and the battered knuckles of a Maze Prison guard (Stuart Graham) who dunks his hands in sink water for relief; in *12 Years a Slave* (2013), Lupita Nyong'o's Patsey is marked for life by scars running up and down her back.

In *End Credits*, McQueen captures a more psychological form of subjugation: The droning dictation and unchanging projection speed evoke the nonstop oppression Robeson experienced in his later years. But McQueen is enough of a realist to acknowledge that the period's witch-hunt mentality didn't originate solely from the top. One of the most outlandish phrasings in the show comes when a citation of Robeson's name is followed by this clarification in parenthesis: "I am not sure of the spelling, but the Negro singer." It seems a strange thing for an FBI agent to write. Sure enough, a later paragraph identifies the author: "I am just an average American housewife interested in keeping check on those who speak to the public."

<https://www.villagevoice.com/2016/05/03/steve-mcqueen-uses-fbi-files-to-capture-the-oppression-of-surveillance/>