

Screening Notes for *Dirty Looks: The Films of Curtis Harrington*. Jan. 26, 2011
'Fragment of Seeking' (1946)
'On the Edge' (1949)
Dynasty Episode 4.7 'Tracy' (1983)

I met Curtis Harrington shortly before his death. It was alarmingly clear then what a creature of Hollywood mythology Harrington was. He had a debonair attitude that was both self-effacing and assured. He spun a comical yarn, recounting to me a screening some 60 years prior at a salon for the avant-garde. With Merce Cunningham and John Cage in attendance, Harrington and a young Kenneth Anger screened their psychodramatic short films for the crowd. After the event, the cordial hostess led the filmmakers by the arm, drawing them into the study. "You are very sick boys," she concluded.

Harrington began making films in his early teens. He met Anger while attending screenings at the American Contemporary Gallery in Los Angeles. After transferring to USC, Harrington made *Fragment of Seeking* (1946), his first film placed in public distribution. Inspired by the experimental films of Maya Deren and Jean Cocteau, *Fragment* was shot around his student dormitory. He worked with Anger, who also had quite a few experimental shorts under his belt before he ventured to make *Fireworks* (1947). Harrington lent a hand in that filming process and in subsequent efforts. He appears in Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1953) as Cesar the Somnambulist, a character from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), where he exacts his occult performance alongside Marjorie Elizabeth Cameron, or just Cameron as she would later be known amongst her disciples. Cameron was a former lover of Jack Parsons and a follower of Aleister Crowley. Harrington made a film, *The Wormwood Star* (1955), devoted to Cameron and her artwork. In fact, it is Harrington who is commonly credited as introducing Anger to the writings of Crowley, a dark figure towards whom both filmmakers would devote much cinematic and occult energy.

With Anger, Harrington also launched the first distribution company for avant-garde cinema, the Creative Film Associates, an organization that predated Cinema 16, Canyon Cinema and the Film-Makers Coop, a screening organization called the Experimental Film Society, and the Creative Film Foundation which recovered and distributed earlier experimental works. An avid cinephile, Harrington also penned the first monograph on Josef Von Sternberg in 1949, long before auteur studies.

Harrington moved into feature filmmaking with his somnolent feature, *Night Tide*. Starring a young Dennis Hopper, the film was self-financed and, unfortunately, caught in distribution limbo for 2 years. The nightmare dream world carries on from his experimental shorts, which evoke dream states, paying homage to the films of Val Lewton (*Cat People*, in particular). Harrington continued to work in features as a protégé to Roger Corman. Building narratives around found Russian space fantasies, Harrington wrote and directed *Voyage to the Prehistoric Planet* (1965) and *Queen of Blood* (1966).

Harrington was hired to helm *What's the Matter with Helen?* (1971) starring Shelley Winters and Debbie Reynolds in an attempt to echo the success of the meta-

Hollywood “has-been” horror film *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*. Praise for that film would send Harrington on a roll, directing films like *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* (1972), *The Killing Kind* (1973), and *Ruby* (1977). Harrington’s films are characterized by a narrative irregularity. As Adam Baran recently observed, they “never do what you expect of them.” Much like his earlier experimental work, these films are marked by a tone of foreboding dread. Harrington made psychological horror films, weaving tales that draw the viewer into the psychological space of the afflicted protagonist. He went on to direct a slew of t.v. movies, mostly about killer animals (*The Cat Creature*, *The Killer Bees*, *The Dead Don’t Die* and *Devil Dog: The Hound From Hell*). When feature work became slim, Harrington took to working with Aaron Spelling, directing episodes of *Charlie’s Angels*, *Vega\$, The Colbys* and *Dynasty*.

What can be said of his first *Dynasty* episode, “Tracy”? Harrington flatly proclaimed, “you can’t make anything artistic out of a television show,” but there’s something particularly thrilling about his taking of the wheel. From one scene to another, there doesn’t seem that there’s so much out of sorts. A fiercely formulaic form of craftsmanship is obviously in full swing. It would seem naive to suggest he had influence of narrative content, to claim that there is more sexual violence in this episode than ones of recent memory. It does feel that way, but Harrington certainly had no hand in the writing process. Perhaps the episode’s preoccupation with setting and individual psychology was what led Spelling to select Harrington for directorial duties. “Tracy” centers around the guilt of Adam Carrington who has attempted to poison rival Jeff Colby with a mercuric oxide compound mixed into decorative paint. More than any character (sorry Alexis fans, she’s quite second fiddle, here) Harrington focuses intently on rooms and the objects that surround this fraught clan. Long shadows spill over Adam as he lurks in the Carrington mansion, shadows writ by a house haunted by family ghosts. Similar darkness enshrouds Anthony Perkins in Harrington’s *How Awful About Allen* (1970). There, too, Harrington instills the house with a claustrophobic psychology, only those working class interiors are replaced by the gilded halls of luxury in “Tracy.” The same aimless camera wanders these empty halls with equal abandon.

Look to what Harrington learned from Von Sternberg. There was a visual filmmaker so devoted to *mise en scene* that he claimed that his movies should be watched upside down to prohibit narrative readings. Here, dolly shots careen through scenes, almost detached from narrative action. Look to the sets, the way they maintain an eerie clutter. Images of Harrington’s house are similarly built out around ornate objects. The bordello scene is particularly lurid. The mirrored walls offset by the purple lighting. Behind Adam and his mate, large glass decanters fill the frame. That Harrington was able to achieve success in so many film forms is a testament to his craft. But it goes beyond craft. Harrington learned a lot from Sternberg, but it wasn’t all visual. Action in the films of Harrington is often slow, languid and beside the point. The procession is not of issue, but the overall psychology that he invests in his scenes. Whether it is a teenage boy on a psychosexual quest or Adam Carrington trapped by his lust for vengeance, Harrington’s gift transforms physical space into a psychological zone of dread and unease. A space truly on the edge.

Bradford Nordeen, January 20, 2011