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## [Curtis Harrington at \*Dirty Looks\*](#)

by [Dan Callahan](#) on January 23rd, 2011 at 11:17 am in [Film](#)



On Wednesday, January 26th at 8pm, at [Participant Inc.](#) (253 East Houston St.), the writer and curator Bradford Nordeen has [programmed](#) an evening of [Curtis Harrington films](#) for the new monthly screening series *Dirty Looks*, starting with two of the director's experimental shorts, *Fragment of Seeking* (1946) and *On the Edge* (1949), and ending with "Tracy" (1983), a Harrington-directed episode of the TV soap *Dynasty*. Harrington, who assisted Kenneth Anger on some of his early films, made his first independent feature in 1961, *Night Tide*, which starred a young Dennis Hopper. He fell in with the Roger Corman crowd and directed some films for Corman, then found his niche as the director of horror-inflected melodramas which usually starred blowsy ladies of a certain age like Shelley Winters and Ann Sothern. In the 1980s, Harrington started directing for episodic television; he died in 2007. I recently spoke with Nordeen about his Harrington program and why this director remains such an intriguing cult figure.

**DC:** What made you choose Curtis Harrington for this inaugural screening of *Dirty Looks*?

**BN:** *Dirty Looks* traces queer visual trends and tactics from one decade to the next, one film form to another. I want the series to expose queer legacies present in contemporary art and film that are closed off because of the obscure nature of experimental cinema. Harrington is a truly exceptional figure because he represents this alternative path. Kenneth Anger has been so canonized in his determination of vision, his auteurist approach towards the avant-garde, but Harrington made similar short films in the 1940s and then brought those visions to a wider audience with his relatively straightforward narrative work. He brings his experimental sensibility into Hollywood (*What's the Matter with Helen?* {1971}), to Roger Corman science fiction (*Queen of Blood* {1966}, *Voyage to the Prehistoric Planet* {1965}) and to television with his episodes of *Charlie's Angels*, *The Colbys* and, of course, *Dynasty*. I find that kind of translation thrilling. Which is not to say he makes *Charlie's Angels* avant-garde, but there's certainly a distinct imprint on his projects. It's most strongly felt in his tone.

**DC:** How are Harrington's first experimental films similar to Kenneth Anger's work at that time, and how are they different?

**BN:** Well, they're both very much inspired by dreams and also young gay sexuality in a time where that was just not discussed. I would say Harrington's work is somewhat more mannered than Anger's. *Fireworks* (1947) is far more sexually explicit, whereas Harrington's film *Fragment of Seeking* (released a year before *Fireworks*) is more Freudian in its use of a female character as a sex partner and doubled self. It's undeniably queer, but Harrington goes about it in a more roundabout way. He also references a lot more from surrealism and early queer films like Jean Cocteau's *The Blood of a Poet* (1930) and Watson and Webber's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), a Poe story that Harrington would adapt twice. There are images of skeletons in wigs that now read as markedly "surreal" where I think Anger, even at 17, was using visual metaphors for their pop or occult significance.

**DC:** Can you offer a few words on the phenomenon of *Dynasty*, what you feel about that show, and how Harrington fits into it?


**BN:** I adore *Dynasty*, myself. I love how the hysteria and opulence build off of one another. There's an essay by Mark Finch called "Sex and Address in *Dynasty*" that explains "the *Dynasty* phenomenon," as you put it, as this surprisingly gay text since it overtly sexualizes men instead of women. Women don these hyperbolic outfits and assume power roles. Harrington was very pragmatic about the show. It was a gig, "a craftsman-like job." He's quoted as saying "you can't make anything artistic out of a television show" but there are these strange, uncanny moments in his episodes. In "Tracy," there's this foreboding tracking shot through an empty hall of the Carrington mansion. It's at odds with the show because it doesn't relate to narrative action in any way. It's just spooky. There's also this seedy bordello scene that's shot in a very vibrant, yet peculiar way, with all of this junk cluttering the frame. It might sound like it's reaching to showcase this as a queer film, but when compared with other episodes from the series, there's something remarkably off-putting in Harrington's episode.

**DC:** Who are some other film figures you'd like to explore in future *Dirty Looks* screenings?

**BN:** There's some really exciting programs in the works. We'll be showing some rarely screened Jack Smith pieces, an Ulrike Ottinger film and perhaps some work-in-progress by Jennie Livingston. I'm personally really psyched to show Michael Robinson's work, in particular his new film *These Hammers Don't Hurt Us*, which re-edits *Cleopatra*-era Elizabeth Taylor as Michael Jackson's mother and spiritual guardian, shepherding him into the afterlife (by way of his Egyptian-themed "Remember the Time" video). And further down the road, we may work in tandem with Participant Inc. to showcase work that corresponds to their queer-centric programming. It's all very thrilling and in development, so join the *Dirty Looks* [Facebook page](#) for the most up-to-date information.

*Dan Callahan's writing has appeared in [Bright Lights Film Journal](#), [Senses of Cinema](#) and the [L Magazine](#), among other publications.*

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