DOROTHY BARENSCOTT

"Sensationalising" Mapplethorpe a Decade Later: What *Dirty Pictures* can show us about the "Culture Wars" today

"I'm looking for the unexpected. I'm looking for things I've never seen before" - Robert Mapplethorpe

"No Limits" - Network Slogan for Cable TV Channel Showtime

In Spring 2000, the cable television channel Showtime premiered one of the most controversial television movies of the year. Titled *Dirty Pictures*, the made-for-TV film was billed as a docudrama centered around the Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center's ill-fated Robert M

Dennis Barrie's personal struggle to persevere through the subsequent obscenity trial that made headlines across North America at the time. The film, however, had been the subject of its own controversy. After ten years in production, several script changes, and a move from HBO to a lesser known cable network, *Dirty Pictures* went through a series of legal battles after the MPAA American ratings board initially issued the finished film an NC-17 rating because of its depiction of several of the most explicit Mapplethorpe photographs.[1] Not only did this ruling potentially restrict Showtime's ability to air the final work, but it also put the film squarely in the same category as soft-core pornography. An appeal, however, succeeded

in having the film assigned a more-acceptable R rating. And in the same week that

cable channel, celebrating its bold “No Limits” programming as the key to its commercial and artistic success.

I raise the issues attending Showtime’s production, timing and debut of *Dirty Pictures*

through the "Sensation" controversy, and connect it to the final production and promotion of *Dirty Pictures,* taking into account the manner in which made-for-TV movies are currently created and marketed.

Coffee Table Sadomasochism

The opening frame of *Dirty Pictures* begins with a silent disclaimer and a warning "For Mature Audiences Only" [fig.2] explaining that in order for the film to remain true to the story of "perhaps the most controversial exhibition in American history," the explicit photographs would be an essential part of the movie's narrative and be displayed in their original and unedited form.[5]

Fig. 2 Still that opens the film

What follows after an opening shot of the Cincinnati court room, a quick pan of a deliberating jury, a shot of protesters outside the court house in Cincinnati [fig.3], and a few sound bites of Senator Jesse Helms and President George Bush making comments about the case, is a lengthy introductory sequence featuring no less than fifty of Mapplethorpe's photographs—images made up mostly of his celebrity portraits and a few nudes, none of which is drawn from the seven most "offensive" images under review.

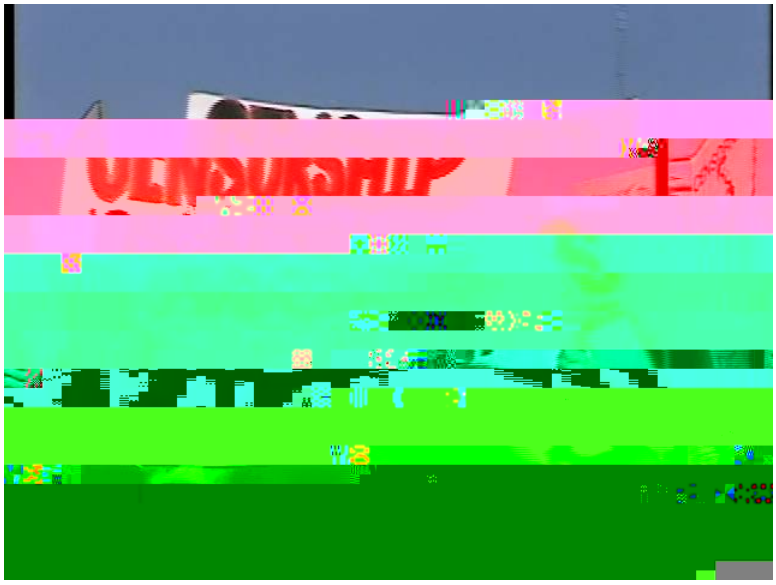

Fig.3 Protest outside Cincinnati court house

Piped in over this parade of images is 2 Live Crew's reworking of Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A.," titled "Banned in the U.S.A."[6] The next scene takes the viewer to a meeting of the American Association of Art Museum Directors. Here, Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center director Dennis Barrie, played by tough guy/hero James Woods, is being urged by his colleagues to continue with the travelling Mapplethorpe exhibition even though the high-profile Corcoran Gallery of Art has just decided to cancel its showing in Washington D.C. The scene closes with Barrie receiving a standing ovation [fig.4] when one of the attendants declares that Barrie must "climb the steep mountain" and exhibit *The Perfect Moment*.

Fig.4 Barrie Dennis receives a standing ovation at a meeting of the American Association of Art Museum Directors

Implicit in the strategic framing of the movie's introduction is a story that is to be understood from a rights-based position. That is, the story is staged around Barrie as reluctant hero, championing the rights of the American people and of institutions of art in a highly charged morality tale. As the trailer for *Dirty Pictures* declares, "He had everything to lose. His country had everything to gain." In turn, what is notable in its absence from the set-up of the film is any mention of Mapplethorpe as an individual or artist, the contextualisation of Mapplethorpe's practice or history of art photography, or any references to the particular subjects or explicit activities displayed in a number of the Mapplethorpe photographs. Attention revolves around the museum director, the court and the public. If nothing else is to be drawn from this deliberate positioning of the film, it is that the defence of Mapplethorpe remains exclusively on the level of the public's right of access to representation and the injustice of censorship at its broadest level.

And while the question of rights is critical and a key component of what was at stake in 1990, it remains problematic in the film, and a reflection of the entire Mapplethorpe controversy, how quickly political opportunism, coupled with the reluctance to deal with the difficult subject matter of Mapplethorpe's photographs, can overshadow the political charge of the work. Paul Morrison, writing on "The Perfect Moment" in "Coffee Table Sex: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Sadomasochism of Everyday Life," argues that his concerns are with the "imbrication of content and context" in the discussion, circulation and consumption of Mapplethorpe's works during the height of the controversy.[7] Therefore, when it comes to the constructions of meaning around Mapplethorpe's work, Morrison notes that the focus remains, more often than not, on the academic and intellectualised discourses concerning aesthetic form and the right to free expression rather than on the corporeality and subversive sexuality suggested in the images: "There is a sense, then, in which to champion the cause of

Mapplethorpe, to argue for the autonomy of the NEA, is not always distinguishable from the right to represent oneself as a champion of artistic freedom."[8] One could argue that the terms of discussion have moved to incorporate more of the latter focus since Morrison wrote this essay eleven years ago. Rising awareness and a more liberal consciousness about homosexuality in the public sphere, together with media circulation and consumption of increasingly provocative visual material, could indeed suggest this to be so. However, I would contend that *Dirty Pictures* works to legitimate and underscore Morrison's argument, emphasising how powerful political opportunism and the claim of artistic expertise remains in today's culture wars. And while I will return to the visual and narrative techniques in the film that work to defuse a direct confrontation with the most sexually explicit and anxious-

juxtaposition and contiguity that *are* the museum. Mapplethorpe, the most 'knowing' of modern artists, knowingly plays with the space of the museum."[11] One pivotal aspect of this process comes with the art expert and/or the curator. Again and again the arguments will be made during the Mapplethorpe controversy that the images were not considered in their curatorial context and that eliminating the offending images would alter the artistic vision of the artist and curator. Therefore, the arguments for legitimating Mapplethorpe's photographs

between narrative and documentary and belonging wholly to neither.[17] What the docudrama argues persuasively for is usually grounded in some kind of relatable injustice that must be fought or questioned—in the case of *Dirty Pictures,* the censorship of the Mapplethorpe exhibition. In this sense, docudramas often consist of figurative or literal trials that place the main characters in various kinds of jeopardy where they are tested. In turn, these "trials" are

Suit, 1980]—which came under attack because of their representational claims and power as indices of the real.

Fig.5 Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter (1979)

Fig.6 Calla Lilly (1988)

Fig.7 Man in Polyester Suit (1980)

The docudrama's drive to overcome and deal with fragmentation and lack of actual data, while making a persuasive argument, emerges in *Dirty Pictures* through the formal strategies of sequencing, interactions and testimony. Sequencing, as described by Lipkin,

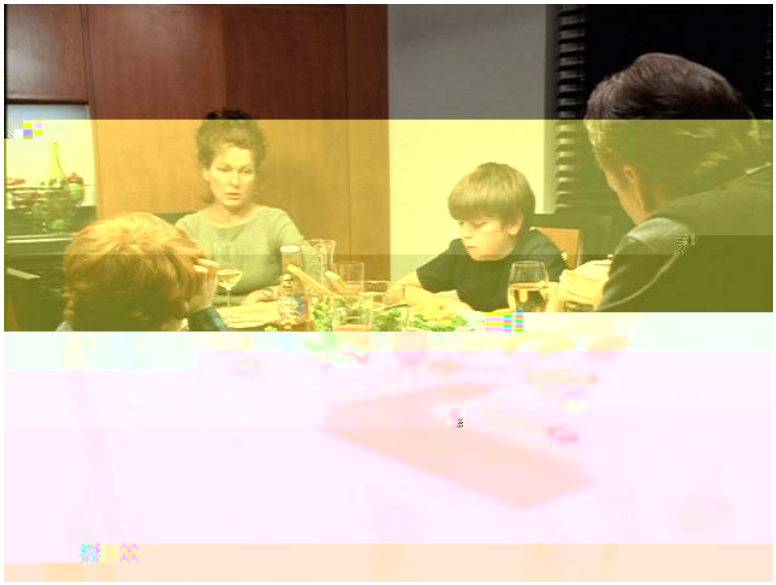

Fig.9 Barrie Dennis as family man

Fig.10 Barrie's wife and children in court

This configuration also sets up the hero as a heterosexual married male, normalising and distancing the more anxious-making aspects of Mapplethorpe's identity as a gay, presumably promiscuous, artist. The stereotypes integral to melodrama emerge most notably in the characterisations of those on the far right and left of the controversy. The leader of the Cincinnati's Citizens for Community values is depicted as a bible-thumping, beer-drinking Republican with a thick southern drawl, while some of the protesters and advocates of Barrie are shown as either leather-clad hoodlums or elitist and snobbish art connoisseurs.

Importantly, it is the character of Barrie who balances these positions and it is through his trials that lost moral structures are restored and recovered. Ben Singer, in *Melodrama and Modernity*, extends the definition of melodrama around a cluster of variable features that punctuate the results on the screen, including pathos, overwrought emotion, moral polarisation, non-classical narrative structure (vignettes), and sensationalism.[26]

In the context of Singer's observations, melodrama is thus understood in terms of *excess*, triggering

the cable network to make the film,[31] there was a powerful set of criteria already in place when Showtime chose *Dirty Pictures* as the film that would help launch its "No Limits" campaign. As Lipkin argues, the movie-of-the-week mantra, existing since the early 1990s, was fixed around the desire for "relatable," "rootable" and "promotable" stories. In turn, the motivation to make TV movies "resulted in new means of commodifying sources of story product, foster[ing] a 'headline' concept (comparable to 'high concept') approach to production and promotion…."[32] *Dirty Pictures,* as a final product, was quick to capitalise on the kinds of debat

[fig.12] that would, ironically enough as Saatchi had done only seven months earlier, profit from deliberately explicit and provocative representation.

Fig.12 Poster for Showtime series shown in USA

In the case of *Queer as Folk*, there was a double reference. Here was a British import that depicted the same gay culture that Mapplethorpe had made the subject of his most controversial photographs, while at the same time bringing to mind and capitalising on the British connections to the "Sensation" controversy in New York. Recalling the "high concept" of made-for-TV films (a term, incidentally, borrowed from the world of advertising—the world Saatchi helped create) each aspect of the relatable, rootable, promotable mantra finds its final resonance in the sensational. The result

towards this goal is to engage the public critically in a process of challenging the "coffee table book" mentality that many museums and galleries promote, creating exhibitions and spaces for discussion where one can look beyond the strictly formal and sensational to