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“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 Mapplethorpe exhibition of 1990, *The Perfect Moment*, and the gallery director 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 *Dirty Pictures* finally premiered, the Supreme Court ruled in a 5-4 decision to strike down a law barring sexually-explicit programming on cable television outside the hours of ten p.m. to six a.m. But perhaps more interestingly, concurrent with Showtime's media publicity effort for *Dirty Pictures* [fig.1], came word that the network had completed a five-month negotiation for rights to the controversial British gay-themed series *Queer as Folk*.

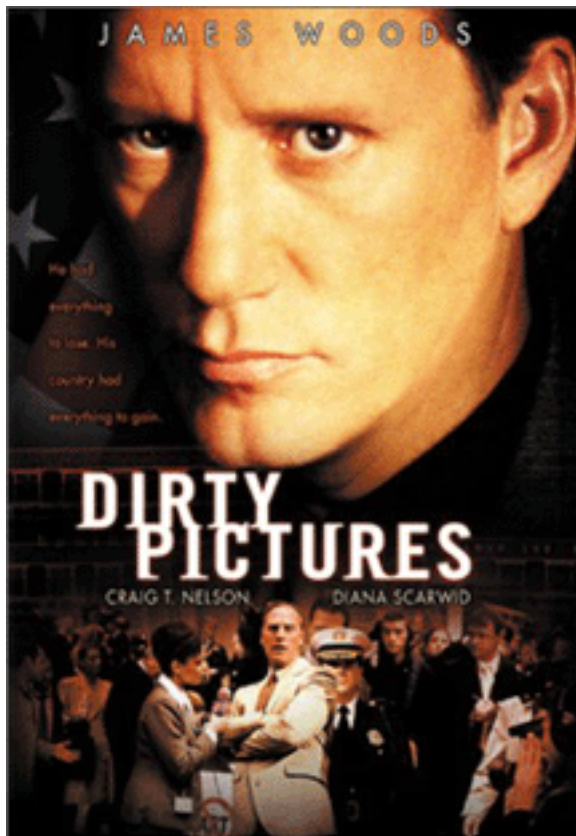


Fig.1 Poster for *Dirty Pictures*

Originally broadcast on the UK's Channel 4, the dramatic comedy stunned Britons with its graphic depictions of sex and frank dialogue centred on the gay cultural scene in Manchester. Still, by the end of 2000, not only had *Dirty Pictures* been awarded the prestigious Golden Globe for best TV Docudrama, the American version of *Queer as Folk* went on to become one of the most critically-lauded and popular television series on Showtime. In the end, Showtime went on to rival HBO in the cable network wars and position itself as *the* premium

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* at the outset because they have provocative and relevant connections to a set of discourses circulating only a few months earlier with the art “scandal” surrounding Charles Saatchi’s 1999 “Sensation” exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. Here, once again, it had appeared that a highly controversial art exhibit was poised to re-ignite the flames of protest around obscenity and art seen a decade earlier with the Mapplethorpe show in Cincinnati. This time, however, for all the controversy around the deliberately shocking art works of a small group of young British artists, there was a keen sense that the show had also succeeded in raising the market value of a collection of one of the world’s most flamboyant and wealthy art patrons. These and other relevant aspects of the “Sensation” show, perhaps best outlined in Andrea Fraser’s aptly titled “A ‘Sensation’ Chronicle” became entangled with a controversy that Fraser argues was

not exclusively about the border between art and the state [and] the freedom of art from political interference. The two other borders by which the art world has long defined itself were also at stake: the border between art and economic interests and the border between so-called high and low, elite and popular culture.²

In turn, the situation in New York surrounding “Sensation” drew attention to how much the dynamic of “the culture wars” had transformed since the NEA crisis of the late 1980s. Not only, as Fraser contends, had “the culture wars” been made products of a process of fragmentation, the “Sensation” scandal revealed deep “fault lines of contradiction” in the boundaries between art, political influence, economic interests, and popular culture.³ Steven Dubin in his essay “How Sensation Became a Scandal” offers a more blunt analysis, describing how the “Sensation” controversy became “a classic pseudo-event,”⁴ conjured up

not only by media hungry for a good story, but manipulated and taken advantage of by a litany of interested parties from all sides of the cultural war divide.

In the context of the discourses surrounding “Sensation,” the Showcase movie *Dirty Pictures* is revealing in its content, representation and promotion. As I will argue in this essay, the formal and narrative elements of the film provide something of a visual roadmap or thinking-through exercise of the dynamic of fragmentation and contradiction, rupture and suture, which Fraser suggests in her discussion of the culture wars—the same set of dynamics that was manifest in the conflicts between art and the discourses surrounding artistic autonomy and market forces ten years after Mapplethorpe’s *The Perfect Moment*. Irony aside, if one is to believe that Mapplethorpe understood the ways in which his work would provoke, an important reason to pay attention to this movie—the way it was scripted, filmed, and promoted—is for how it reveals, through its own filmic devices, the problematic destiny of the Mapplethorpe photographs and the troubled entanglements that continue to develop to the present day in the arenas of high art, gay subculture, and corporate institutions. I will argue that *Dirty Pictures*, in part, sets up a visual and narrative dialogue, collapsing past events and present day concerns. In turn, these concerns crystallise around the simultaneous and contradictory elision of the political content of Mapplethorpe’s photographs and the affirmation of the legitimacy of those same photographs as art. This occurs from a number of productive vantage points. First, I will trace what I am terming the “right to representation” arguments that emerged out of the original Mapplethorpe exhibition. I argue that these discourses have a direct impact on the narrative framework set out in *Dirty Pictures*. Second, turning to the film itself and the genre of the docudrama, I will discuss the narrative and formal representation of the Mapplethorpe controversy set out in *Dirty Pictures* positioned through the lenses of re-enactment, sequencing, testimony and melodrama. Third, I will address the fragmentation of representation and media sensationalisation, conjured up

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

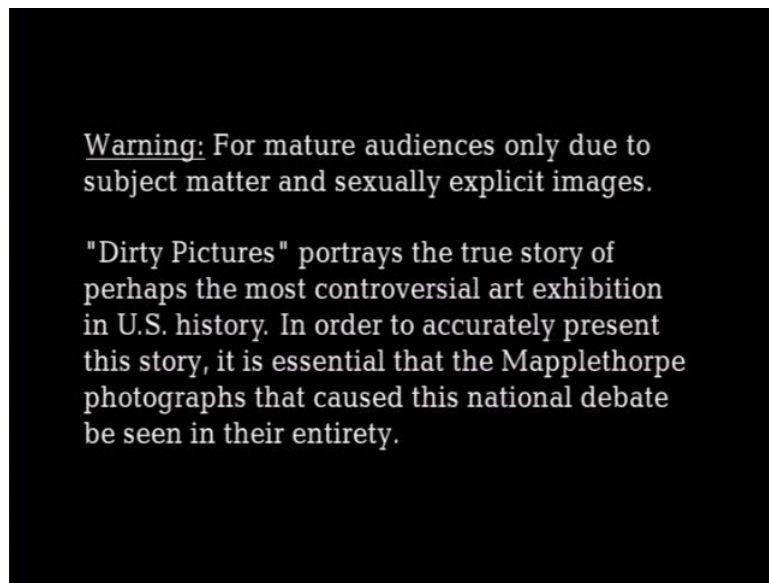


Fig. 2 Still that opens the film

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-making aspects of Mapplethorpe’s work, I want to highlight here how precarious the negotiation of these concerns remains and suggest the power struggle to control the terms of its discourse.

One of the most astute observations Morrison makes to suggest how the political and sexual content of Mapplethorpe’s images is, in part, subjugated, arises in his discussion of art photography and the museum collection. It is within the category of art photography that Morrison argues the original technique of photography has forgone the advantage of reproducing the real world in space: “For the high art photograph, like all modern art objects, structures itself in relation to the museum, which it labors to make its final destination.”⁹ A corollary of the modern art object and the economy in which it functions is the collection or juxtaposition of one art object to another. Values and meanings of art works are assigned in a relation of similarity and dissimilarity. The organisational principle of “The Perfect Moment” plays out this process with the juxtaposition of discrete portfolios—here a formal study of an orchid, there an explicit sexual act.¹⁰ Yet, as Morrison observes, “[as] an individual exhibit within the larger spaces of the museum, ‘The Perfect Moment’ ... replicates the relations of

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 as art became fixed primarily around formal and aesthetic concerns and expertise, not around the charged content of the images. Not unlike a coffee table book then, which Morrison likens to the modern museum, the resulting dynamic of spectatorship and consumption continues to bypass the greater political and social underpinnings of the work:

For if the coffee table book... like the museum itself, elides cultural and historical context, if it reduces all to objects of purely aesthetic contemplation, so too does the coffee table book of sadomasochistic sexual acts. True, the coffee table Mapplethorpe, unlike the book it displaces, pays a double dividend: it is simultaneously inscribed with the message “I value culture” and “I am politically correct.” I have the right of access to representations of the perverse, and I exercise that inalienable right by owning a coffee table miscellany of perversions. The third dividend—I need not acknowledge my interest in the perverse—obviously goes without saying.¹²

Turning to the catalogue for “The Perfect Moment,” one is immediately struck by how much attention *is* given to the formal aesthetic elements of Mapplethorpe’s photographs. Kay Larson, for example, declares Mapplethorpe “the best classicizing photographer of his generation.”¹³ And when there is an attempt to deal with the sexual and more anxious-making aspects of the photographic content, as in David Joselit’s discussion of Mapplethorpe’s poses, there is a tendency to set the terms of discussion around highly theoretical, abstracted and vague language which diminishes the specificity of context around Mapplethorpe and the kind of culture that, in part, produced him. An example of Joselit: “In [Mapplethorpe’s] photography, the paradox of *posing* for the camera... is developed from a private anxiety to an iconic or universal one. The message that Mapplethorpe delivers is that experience of

masculinity or feminine identity is the sensation of an unstable, constantly readjusted succession of poles.”¹⁴ This kind of art criticism or expertise, while significant in its attempts to come to terms with aspects of Mapplethorpe’s practice, engages ironically enough in a process of legitimisation of artistic autonomy that Andrea Fraser argues the avant-garde has tried many times to dissolve.¹⁵ In turn, there is a disconnect that emerges between the authority of those professionals who want to support Mapplethorpe as an artist and the will of Mapplethorpe to reflect a part of gay subculture to his viewer. In this respect, recalling the “Sensation” exhibition in New York a decade after Mapplethorpe, Fraser argues that Saatchi as “connoisseur of subculture” had fostered even greater divisions and moved the focus even further away from the context of the artists’ work:

To the aesthetic language of form and the ethnographic language of culture, we can add the language of subculture. The appropriation of “subculture” within the field of art, however, doesn’t function only to subvert the essentialism of traditional aesthetic taste. It also functions to support the legitimacy of an equally rarified contemporary taste by maintaining its distance from the “vulgar commercialism” of middlebrow culture and the economic criteria it supposedly reflects.¹⁶

As I will argue in the following section on the specific narrative and formal filmic conventions employed in *Dirty Pictures*, the storyline’s attempt to deflect certain political and social aspects of the Mapplethorpe exhibition and controversy while sensationalising others has a direct correlation to the “scandal” propagated around Saatchi’s “Sensation” exhibition.

Docudrama: Blurring Fact, Sensationalising Fiction

As a made-for-TV movie based on an actual event, *Dirty Pictures* employs the conventions of the docudrama genre. Docudrama, as described by Steven Lipkin in *Real Emotional Logic: Film and Television Docudrama as Persuasive Practice*, contains a synthesis of documentary and narrative forms that function, in essence, as “a persuasive argument,” riding the fence

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 chosen to reflect real events and actual people who are known through public record. Importantly, the moral position that ultimately becomes the claim made by the film’s narrative is punctuated by the formal strategies of film that bring together actuality and re-creation.¹⁸ As Lipkin outlines, “arguments put to persuasive purpose consist of data (evidence), claims (what the argument advocates), and warrants (the connections between claims and evidence).”¹⁹ The popularity of docudrama is founded upon such a formula. By enveloping the audience in the experience of a story and persuading through the close resemblance to fact, the stories of docudrama attempt to persuade with “a logic of motivated iconicity:”

Even as docudrama departs from documentary proper, the two modes retain a certain semiotic similarity. The evolving technology of mainstream documentary progressively has aligned representation and actuality. The documentary image functions as an index. Comparable imagery in docudrama remains primarily iconic; however, docudrama asks if, under its terms, the two signs may not be all that different.²⁰

It is of course the gaps or ruptures between the representation and actuality that must be smoothed over and sutured. Not unlike the “pseudo-event” that was the “Sensation” exhibit, *Dirty Pictures* becomes a kind of “pseudo-documentary” that capitalises on the same attempts to make sense of a terrifically complex set of interests. And of course, important parallels can be drawn with the actual cause for concern—the Mapplethorpe photographs [fig.5, *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter*, 1979; fig.6, *Calla Lilly*, 1988; fig.7, *Man in Polyester*

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, "links space in actual footage re-created space."²¹ Throughout the film, shots of the re-created Cincinnati courtroom alternate with shots of actual newsreels of street protest [fig.8] and the re-created jury room, generating a kind of spatial unity between the actual and re-created portions of the sequence.



Fig.8 Actual news reel footage from the protests

Interactions refer to the actor/character placing themselves in the actual location of the events. Since *Dirty Pictures* was shot in Toronto and not Cincinnati, the force of interaction is somewhat lessened. Still, the attempt to model Cincinnati locales and splice in actual footage of the city, while maintaining continuity in the look of the American mid-west and its institutions, brings actuality and fiction into the same cinematic space. As a result, a kind of truth by association emerges, especially when—as in the case of Barrie’s news conferences on the steps of the Cincinnati courthouse—the re-created scenes are shot on the same kind of video equipment used in the newsreel footage. In turn, as Lipkin argues, the “modeling of the

iconic material is tested and its validity reinforced through its proximity to indexical imagery.”²²

Finally, testimony acts as a potent antidote for what Bill Nichols in *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* refers to as the “‘body too many’ problem of reenactment” where the bodies of actors and extras never match the historical bodies they represent.²³ *Dirty Pictures* makes copious use of this strategy, interjecting actual interviews with those who were both close to the original controversy (Jesse Helms, Alfonso D’Amato, Barney Frank, Pat Buchanan, etc.) and those who have a vested interest, yet were not tied directly to the controversy (Salman Rushdie, Susan Sarandon, Fran Lebowitz, etc.). These images serve to authenticate testimony today about what is known about historical events, and, like re-enactments, diminish “the mystery of presense/absense, then/now... the continuation of the past in the present, its corporeal incarnation through speech and action.”²⁴ Significantly, in *Dirty Pictures* the dates of testimony are not noted on video clips, leaving in further doubt when the interviews were made, solidifying the collapse between past and present-day events.

Considering the power of docudrama to persuade in the absence of actual documentary material, the melodramatic component of docudrama exists to produce some sense of familiarity, empathy, and emotive connection to the story being told. In turn, the conventional description of a melodrama is generally characterised as a drama of exaggerated emotions, stereotypical characters, and interpersonal conflicts. Critically, as Lipkin argues, film melodrama constructs domestic settings and familial images within the context of larger social systems that are exposed in the narrative as corrupt and repressive.²⁵ Within *Dirty Pictures*, the melodrama is successfully created around the character of Dennis Barrie, his wife and two children, struggling with the harassment and hatred directed towards them during the obscenity trial [figs.9,10].



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 and inviting certain visceral and active responses from the spectator. Often, however, the actual events or historical data being represented in a docudrama are not spectacular or clear-cut enough to elicit such a powerful response. It is therefore significant to pay attention to the kind of "artistic licence" taken in the re-creation of the Mapplethorpe controversy during the scripting and filming of *Dirty Pictures*. Perhaps the greatest licence is taken with the depiction of Barrie being offered a bribe of \$100,000 to shut down the exhibit.²⁷ While the real Dennis Barrie denies the existence of such an offer, the fictionalized scenario of Barrie's reluctance to take the bribe [fig.11] successfully strengthens Barrie's moral character in the melodramatic framing of the docudrama.



Fig.11 Barrie Dennis being offered a bribe to withhold court testimony

At the same time, there is an important distancing made through the narrative between art and commercial interests—a distancing that is not as clearly understood in the actual world of museum and gallery politics. Other key exaggerations are made when the film shows Barrie refusing at first to testify in court, arguing with his wife about the graphic nature of the Mapplethorpe photographs, and confronting the president of Citizens for Community Values when his family begins receiving threatening phone calls.²⁸ These fictionalised incidents are used as melodramatic devices to heighten pathos and create greater conflicts in the narrative, while seeking, however problematically, to sharpen boundaries that are blurred and fragmented in the actual “culture wars” of the past and the present.²⁹ Once again, if we think of the actual Mapplethorpe photographs represented in the film, there are parallels to be drawn with the fuzzy boundaries of how Mapplethorpe as artist arranged and composed the subjects of his images for maximum effect, versus how museum curators placed them in exhibition, or how the producers of a provocatively titled commercial film chose to show them. Drawing if not exactly a melodramatic response, there is a sense at least of an attempt to mitigate the viewer’s reaction to what is being shown and in what context it is being shown. What remains at stake then is dependant on what is being overshadowed with each act of “artistic licence.”

Torn From the Headlines: Relatability, Rootability and Promotability

Returning to Saatchi and the 1999 “Sensation” controversy, I would argue that there is a more direct connection between the release of *Dirty Pictures* and the events seen in New York seven months earlier than any of the film’s critics or producers suggest.³⁰ Ten years in the making, *Dirty Pictures* was by all accounts doomed to become yet another unrealised film script when film producer Michael Manheim finally convinced Showtime to finance his project in 1999. And while the official press describes Manheim’s “tenacity” in convincing

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 debates and public exposure to “obscene art” that the “Sensation” exhibition in New York had generated. And perhaps more significantly, Showtime understood how the controversy, created in large part through the media hype, had helped Saatchi amass greater interest in, and value for, his collection. Not surprisingly, when the history of the film script’s evolution is examined, there is a transition from a documentary film about a First Amendment battle to a docudrama detailing the personal strife of Barrie and his family.

In this way, the New York “story” had all the hallmarks of a perfect made-for-TV movie. It was relatable in the sense that audiences could empathize and identify with Barrie and his wife (the role of Barrie’s wife was very important since a female hero typically leads TV movies). The film was rootable in that the true story’s origins and recognisability as “news” had both current and historic resonance. Finally and most importantly to the movie’s producers and financiers, the film was promotable. Knowing that TV movies as non-serial entities often had a limited shot at capturing an audience, *Dirty Pictures* was poised for success as it drew on both timely and heated debates in the art world, marked by the titillating content of the film, and profiting from the publicity that ensued when the project was assigned an NC-17 rating. These developments were then topped off with the added publicity of Showtime as creator of an American version of *Queer as Folk*—a new television series

[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 resulting configuration around *Dirty Pictures*, then, is “detached consumption,” which, as Bill Nichols states so forcefully, further erodes the spectator’s historical consciousness and ability to discern fact and fiction, form and context:

It is something like a perversely exhibitionistic version of the melodramatic imagination: provide a “hook” by underlining an important aspect of the case—its scale, severity, uniqueness, or consequences; offer a dab of location realism; sketch in characters quickly; dramatize sensational aspects of the case—usually aspects of intense threat to human life and bodily integrity; move swiftly to an emotional climax; and urge a specific response—grief, alarm, fear, consolation, shock. Conclude the episode with a resonant moment and perhaps a pause for affective response to the

marvellous and terrifying, the challenging and remarkable, the extraordinary and the corrupt.

What *Dirty Pictures* Can Show Us: By Way of Conclusion

If the “culture wars” still exist, as Andrea Fraser suggests they do, the “Sensation” controversy asks us to consider what the new topographies of power are and where and how they are being mapped. The production, promotion and circulation of *Dirty Pictures* offers one place to look and helps us to think through the kind of relationships that are undoubtedly emerging in today’s art institutions. In this case study, we are confronted with the ugly underbelly of the “culture wars” as it was made manifest at the height of the “Sensation” scandal—exposing the increasingly permeable borders between art and economic interests, the commercialisation and connoisseurship of subculture, and the transparent and problematic process of defending and policing artistic autonomy at the expense of important political and social contexts. At the core of these power struggles is the potency of representation in all its forms. *Dirty Pictures* shows us how quickly, efficiently, and persuasively the index can be confused with its referent, made to fill in the fractures that are increasingly part of an overall fragmentation of all modes of knowledge. And located around Mapplethorpe’s photographs—images that continue to disturb and defy classification—these problems seem particularly apt. We are thus left to ask: if the pseudo-event or manufactured “scandal” was the most interesting aspect of Saatchi’s “Sensation” exhibition, what can be said of the art and artists that helped constitute it or the subjects taken up in their work? What is the final fate of the museum and museum director or curator under such circumstances and to whom does it owe its allegiance? Perhaps the real Dennis Barrie’s departure from the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center to head a company that creates “for-profit museums for the 21st century” gives us one answer.³³ Still, if there are productive sites of dialogue remaining in today’s “culture wars,” they must be recognised in their disentangled forms. One step

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 confront, head on, the social and political.

¹ Ben Patrick Johnson, “‘No Limits’ on Mapplethorpe Film and Brit-inspired Gay TV Series on Showtime” (*Culture Kiosque*, 26 May 2000), <http://www.culturekiosque.com/nouveau/tele/rhemapple.html>

² Andrea Fraser, “A Sensation Chronicle” (*Social Text* 19.2, 2001), 127.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Steven Dubin, “How ‘Sensation’ Became a Scandal” (*Art in America*, January 2000), 59.

⁵ *Dirty Pictures*, dir. Frank Pierson, 1 hr. 44 min., USA: MGM Home Entertainment, 2000.

⁶ The rap group 2 Live Crew’s album and title track, *Banned in the USA*, premiered amidst the height of the Mapplethorpe controversy in 1990.

⁷ Paul Morrison, “Coffee Table Sex: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Sadomasochism of Everyday Life” (*Genders* 11, 1991), 17.

⁸ Morrison, 20.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ In the catalogue for “The Perfect Moment,” Kay Larson makes the connection between these juxtapositions in an attempt to provide meaning for both kinds of Mapplethorpe photographs: “The gleam of light on a dark body, flowing slowly into the vortex of curly hair in the man’s crotch, creates a visceral, guttural, pleasurable shock. So it is with the perfect flaring arc of an orchid and leaf in a white vase, or the blousy elegance of a drooping tulip.” Kay Larson, “Robert Mapplethorpe” in Janet Kardon, David Joselit and Kay Larson, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 16.

¹¹ Morrison, 20.

¹² Ibid, 24.

¹³ Larson, 15.

¹⁴ David Joselit, “Mapplethorpe’s Poses” in Kardon et al., *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, 21.

¹⁵ Fraser, 137.

¹⁶ Ibid., 149.

¹⁷ Steven K. Lipkin, *Real Emotional Logic: Film and Television Docudrama as Persuasive Practice* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), x.

¹⁸ Lipkin, xi.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 4.

²¹ Ibid, 24.

²² Ibid, 25.

²³ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 4.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Lipkin, 5.

²⁶ Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 44-48.

²⁷ John Kiesewetter, “‘Dirty Pictures’ Uses Plenty of Artistic License” (*The Cincinnati Enquirer*, 21 May 2000), http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2000/05/21/loc_dirty_pictures_uses.html

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ While melodrama has traditionally been employed to forge a sense of belonging, creating clear and fixed counterpoints of good and evil, us and other, the results are decidedly ambiguous and not as clear-cut as the melodrama/realism, “high vs. low art,” dichotomy that is typically constructed. As Singer argues, melodrama “foments psychic energies and emotions which the narrative represses and blocks from full expression, gratification and resolution, because they are fundamentally incompatible with the demands of dominant

patriarchal ideology” (46). One consequence is that these energies, like “neurotic symptoms” are diverted and channelled through other forms of expression, especially, Singer argues, in non-naturalistic *mise-en-scene*.

³⁰ I make this observation since the few critics who have mentioned the “Sensation” controversy in relation to the Mapplethorpe case, set out in *Dirty Pictures*, do so as an incidental note or interesting coincidence.

³¹ John Kiesewetter, “ ‘Dirty Pictures’ Producer Preserved” (*The Cincinnati Enquirer*, 24 May 2000), http://www.enquirer.com/columns/kiese/2000/05/24/jki_dirty_pictures.html

³² Lipkin, 56.

³³ C. Carr, “The Way We Were: Showtime Exhumes the Mapplethorpe Trial” (*Village Voice*, 31 May 2000), <http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0022/carr.php>