

Remembering Dennis Hopper Curtis Harrington's *Night Tide*

Wednesday, October 27 at 7:30 pm — Victoria Theater
co-presented with Cosmic Hex in association with The Vortex Room

Curtis Harrington (1926–2007) stands as an underappreciated figure in the history of West Coast avant-garde filmmaking. Deeply inspired by the surrealistic ethos of compatriot Maya Deren, Harrington's early poetic films works, which recall the work of his occasional collaborator Kenneth Anger, are studies of fantasy and subtle atmospheres, glimpses into fantastical realms equally glamorous and occult. This belated memorial screening to this undersung auteur includes a very rare screening of his 1955 short *The Wormwood Star* (featuring Marjorie Cameron) and his first feature film, the equally rare, *Night Tide* (1961), featuring the late great Dennis Hopper (1936-2010) in his first leading role. Inspired largely by the atmospheric approach to horror pioneered by Val Lewton and James Whale, *Night Tide* is a somnambulistic dream film of sailors and sirens, set on the seaside boardwalks of Southern California. (Steve Polta)

The Wormwood Star (1955) by Curtis Harrington; 16mm, color, sound, 10 minute

This film has been restored by the Academy Film Archive with support from The Film Foundation and Curtis Harrington. Print courtesy of the Academy Film Archive.

"The world is like a great sea: only a few manage to walk on the water. These water-walkers see far and when they manage to communicate their vision to us we receive a marvelous gift. The most marvelous gifts of which the cinema is capable have not yet been given to us. Of the ways of communicating vision, surely the cinema offers the greatest challenges is plainly too formidable for most. Yet I am convinced that its appeal should not only be to giants. There will one day be an Emily Dickinson of the cinema.

"My own work has suffered in countless ways from circumstance and I won't enter into a detailed accounting. I feel that I must, in any case, assume the major part of the responsibility. I am loath to accept all of it, though perhaps I have little right to take such an attitude. My films bear no name on them other than my own, except, occasionally, for the felicitous one of my composer, Ernest Gold, who does for me what I am truly incapable of doing.

"I have recently been making a film called *The Wormwood Star*. It is a film in color, and presents a symbolic portrait of an extraordinary artist, a painter who is named Cameron. The film is an attempt to apotheosize the artist cinematically while she yet lives. She is presented as an alchemist, we observe the Great Work, and out of that mysterious complex of action and magic the ultimate transmutation takes place: the flesh turns into gold.

In the future I shall go farther along the esoteric path that is suggested by *The Wormwood Star*. If I find the means—and I have not done so yet—I shall make a long film in color which will be called *Voyage to the Earth of Mystery* [never completed].

"In the meanwhile, inspired by my admiration for those who have, even if only momentarily, crossed with success the commercial chasm, I am treading gingerly that hovering, swaying tightrope as well." (Curtis Harrington, "A Statement." Written in 1956. Published in *Film Culture*, vol. 29, Summer 1963. Reprinted in *Curtis Harrington: Cinema on the Edge*, Amy Greenfield, ed.)

Night Tide (1963) by Curtis Harrington; 35mm, b&w, sound, 84 minutes

This film has been restored by the Academy Film Archive. Print courtesy of the Academy Film Archive.

Amy Greenfield: How did you get your role in *Night Tide*?

Dennis Hopper: Curtis and I were friends so it just happened. I kind of fell into it.

AG: Curtis said that you got to know him first because you were going to screenings of his and Kenneth [Anger's] films, and from your admiration of this films that's why he felt he could offer you the role, and now that I know more about you, that seems more natural to me, but was that unusual? Did you have to really... did you seek those films out, did you know anyone else who... did Hollywood people just generally go to avant-garde things at that time? Or did you, were you different that way from the actors you were working with? [...]

DH: They had them down here in Venice [CA] actually. They would show them in little coffeehouses and so on. And some in Hollywood. So that's where we'd run it. It was just a natural progression from the foreign films even the porno films to the underground films. It was also a very exciting time because everybody was—we were trapped in a situation where Hollywood dominated everything from the studio system, so we were outside of the system, really. Running around trying to figure out how we could make films. So going to see experimental films and... that's why when I made *Easy Rider* [1969, directed by Hopper] I was determined to make a film that wasn't just going to be shown to my friends in some little room somewhere.

[...]

AG: [W]as there something really specific about the role [in *Night Tide*] that drew you in [...]?

DH: You know, I don't really know. You know at the time I just wanted to work, and I considered Curtis an artist. And also, he was inside the system at that time, he was Jerry Wald's assistant at 20th Century Fox. He was working inside the studio system, and we were making this outside the system.

[...]

AG: ...well I have this perception—you might or might not agree—but when I think of the role, and you in it, and now you see your self-portrait photograph with the light face beside the dark face, it just somehow reminds me of your character in *Night Tide*.

DH: "Within a man of light there's only light; within a man of darkness there is only darkness"?

AG: Yeah.

DH: Yeah I think that could be compared.

AG: And I was just looking at the beginning and the first shot of you on the pier, and one side is light and the other's dark, and then you go in to make the photograph, and the light is going on and off, and your face is literally [...] dark and then light and then dark and then light. And then, [...] when I saw your self-portrait [...] I just thought of what you were doing with the role, and how they lit it, and how they lit your face, and your perceptions about the role, it just came together for me.

[...]

DH: But you know I think that all these things are connected, and whether... I didn't think of it consciously, but sometimes we don't think of it, because you're in that process [,] you know? Whether we get it immediately or whether it comes to us later. It's all sort of part of the same thing.

AG: And that's the area that Curtis wants to work with, and what you're in contact with...

DH: ...and you know also—and I think Curtis would agree with this also—but I've always equated what Jean Cocteau was saying—I think it was Jean Cocteau—who said that 98% of creation was accident, and 1% was intellect, and 1% was logic. The art was learning how to make the accident work for you. And when I think of *Night Tide*, I think that Curtis had a very strong script, he knew where we were going moment to moment, but within that there was the freedom to create and then learn to make the accident work for us. (Amy Greenfield: "Rembrandt Fucked the Maid: An Interview with Dennis Hopper on *Night Tide* and Its Context." Published in *Curtis Harrington: Cinema on the Edge*, Amy Greenfield, ed.)

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