



Cruising, directed by William Friedkin (1980, Hollywood: United Artists Corporation), poster.

FILM REVIEW

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A Gay Killer on the Police Force: *Cruising* and Queer Police Abolition

WILLIAM FRIEDKIN, DIRECTOR
Cruising (1980). Culver City, CA:
Lorimar Film Entertainment.

Cruising has a complex legacy within the history of queer cinema. The film follows Steve Burns (Al Pacino), as he goes undercover in New York City's underground gay leather S&M bar scene to catch a serial killer. A rookie cop, handpicked for the job by Captain Edelson (Paul Sorvino) for his physical similarity to the killer's previous victims, the ostensibly heterosexual Burns leaves his girlfriend Nancy behind to take up residence in the West Village, and befriends Ted Bailey, a struggling gay playwright and neighbour. The film spends much of its time following Burns as he visits nightclubs in the city's Meatpacking District, with frames packed to the brim with gay men engaging in explicit sexual activity. By the end of the film, it is heavily implied in an often-debated final shot that Burns himself was the (a?) murderer, as if all that exposure to gay leather S&M culture somehow made him both gay and a killer.

The film is stylish and engrossingly noirish, though wildly homophobic both in the way it reduces its queer characters to stereotypes (Bailey is a playwright, his roommate is a dancer, and the film's one trans character, DaVinci, is a sex worker), and in the casual way it links gay sex to murder. During the first murder, Friedkin splices in a split-second explicit shot of gay anal sex as the killer stabs his victim, as if a cock in your ass is as bad as a knife in your back. But watching the film anew in 2021, it was not the film's overt homophobia, nor the film's explicit sexuality, that struck me the most. Rather, what struck me was just how surprisingly anti-cop the film seemed to be. While the film is not necessarily advocating for the abolition of policing, as called for presently by Black Lives Matter and allied activists, *Cruising* offers a trenchant indictment of policing and an engaging reminder of why we must continue to advocate for police abolition within the queer community.

Revisiting the film's reception over the last 40 years, few critics have picked up on the film's distrust of cops. When *Cruising* was in production on location

in New York in the summer of 1979, the film was protested by some members of the gay community for what they predicted would be a film that would only increase homophobic violence. When re-released on DVD in 2007, the film was more positively received. Depicting a moment just before the HIV/AIDS epidemic reconfigured our sexual practices, *Cruising* was received as a compelling and sexually explicit document of gay life in the 1970s: as D.A. Miller wrote, "from being barely able to suggest what two gay men did at home between sheets, Hollywood suddenly proceeds to grant us a full and accurate idea of what scores of them were doing at the Anvil in slings."¹ No mainstream Hollywood film before or after *Cruising* has so defiantly and explicitly depicted a man being fisted in a sling.

My impulse to revisit the film today is occasioned by its inclusion in The Criterion Channel's fourth edition of its *Queersighted* program in June 2021 as part of a roster of "taboo-breaking queer-themed" films including queer canon mainstays *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991) and *Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, 1989).² Including *Cruising* in a curated queer film program like *Queersighted* further cements its status as an important object within the queer cinematic archive, but also encourages us to reconsider what the film can tell us about our present moment. During a moment when mainstream queer visual culture is overdetermined by images of sexless homonormative couples, *Cruising*'s explicit sexuality is a revelation. Further, the film offers a compelling critique of policing beyond the usual allegorical treatment many critics reduce it to. Damon R. Young, for instance, treats the film's approach to the interchangeability of gay men and police as an analogy "between the sadomasochistic homoeroticism of the gay leather scene and the ostensibly straight homosociality of the police force."³ In short: the violence enacted by police is read as analogous to the sexual violence enacted in the gay leather bars. Male bonds, homosocial

or homosexual, are predicated on violence.

If we take this allegory to its limit, *Cruising* makes a rather radical statement: policing is inherently violent and homophobic. This is a point queer characters in the film make repeatedly. The film's opening sexual assault of DaVinci, a trans sex worker, by Patrolman DiSimone is dismissed when DaVinci tries to report it to the police. When DaVinci tells Edelson that she was assaulted by a cop, he questions if it really was a cop who assaulted her: "You know how many guys were arrested last year for impersonating a cop? There's more guys out there impersonating cops than there are actual cops."

This point is made again by Ted Bailey, Steve Burns' neighbour while he's undercover. As the two eat breakfast at a diner, Bailey remarks "Hey did you read about the killings? 'Homo killer on the prowl.' Talk of every gay bar in town. I'm scared to death of cruising myself." Burns dismisses Bailey's concerns and tells him the "cops are gonna get him." An incredulous Bailey retorts: "Cops? Listen if they get their hands on him, they'll make him a member of the vice squad." Throughout the film, the police are shown to be ineffectual and indifferent to the murders.

The film's final moments offer the strongest indictment of the police. *Cruising* climaxes in Central Park with Burns cruising Stuart Richards, who the police have decided is the man responsible for the killings. Like many decisions made by the police in the film, it is unclear how they came to this realization. Burns leads Richards to a secluded part of the park and demands he gets undressed. While Richards struggles to get his pants off, Burns stabs him with a knife. The film cuts to Richards in the hospital, with Edelson accusing him of attacking Burns and threatening him with 20 years in prison unless he confesses to all the murders. Richards denies it, saying he "never killed anybody."

The audience is shown that Richards never attacked Burns. We also

know the police have been bungling this case from the beginning. Yet we are to believe Richards was the murderer? Friedkin appears to continue to encourage our suspicions with the film's final shots, where Burns' girlfriend, Nancy, puts on his leather jacket, cap, and aviator sunglasses. Many critics read this moment as Burns "becoming" the killer.⁴ This was certainly the case in the original novel the film was based on, though the film is ambiguous and makes no definitive statement as such. Further complicating matters, Friedkin cast multiple men as the murderer throughout the film, and while I think this does indeed invite a reading where Friedkin is imploring us to consider all gay men as murderers, I think it also invites a reading where the police are structurally and materially culpable for the murders of multiple gay men.

It's here where *Cruising* began to echo for me the Bruce McArthur killings in Toronto. Between 2010 and 2017, eight gay men — mostly Middle Eastern and South Asian — went missing from the Church-Wellesley Village, the epicentre of the city's queer community. It wasn't until a white gay man, Andrew Kinsman, went missing in June 2017 that the police appeared to take seriously the community's concerns that there was a serial killer targeting the gay community. Following McArthur's arrest, it was revealed that he had been a suspect in a previous missing persons case but had been dismissed by police. The mishandling of the McArthur case made visible to the white gay community what Black Lives Matter knew when they protested Toronto Pride in 2016 and what Ted Bailey said in *Cruising* 40 years prior: if the police ever caught a serial killer targeting gay men, they'd make him a member of the force.

NOTES

1. D. A. Miller, "Cruising," *Film Quarterly* 61, 2 (2007): 70.

2. "The Criterion Channel's June 2021 Lineup," The Criterion Collection, May 26, 2021, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/7401-the-criterion-channel-s-june-2021-lineup>.

3. Damon R. Young, *Making Sex Public and Other Cinematic Fantasies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 130.

4. Edward Guthmann, "The Cruising Controversy: William Friedkin vs. the Gay Community," *Cinéaste* 10, 3 (1980): 2–8.

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