Sex, death and free speech:  
the fight to stop Friedkin's Cruising  
Scott Tucker

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The Ramble, a bucolic thicket on the west side of Central Park, has been a cruising spot for as long as anyone can remember. Cole Porter celebrated it in song in 1935 ("Picture Central Park without a sailor...") and it is still one of New York's most popular rendezvous, sun-dappled and casual by day, more intense at night.

And more dangerous. One night last summer a gang of toughs roamed through with baseball bats ("We went out to get the queers," one of them said later in his court testimony) and beat six men. Five were taken to hospital, seriously injured.

This morning, though, the place seems idyllic: gay men in cut-offs and swimsuits lie sunning, talking, now and then rising to go off into the woods. For a while I wander the twisted paths, picking my way through the dense growth, and finally sit down on a bench to read my book of essays by Rosa Luxemburg and eat fruit from my knapsack. Police barricades are still up nearby: the night before, William Friedkin had been shooting a castration-killing scene here for his film, Cruising.

I am in New York for the protests against the film. On August 20, 1979, eight hundred of us had marched from a rally in Sheridan Square to a film site on West Street. We had shrilled our disco whistles like a swarm of angry locusts and had whooped Indian warcries — "The streets belong to the people!" On West Street the cops surrounded us. Somebody handed me an egg and I figured eggs can't beat clubs — I was saving it for Friedkin when a cop took it. "But that's for my breakfast," I said, and then added, "Sit on it."

Mounted police charged into a large group that had broken away to get closer to the filming. Nightsticks cracked on skulls and some of the protesters began to throw bottles. One man tried setting fire to a camera cable with a book of matches and was quickly circled by kicking, clubbing cops. A dozen of us broke through, grabbed the cable and began a tug of war with the police until they pummelled us back. For the first time in my life I called cops "pigs."

Interviewed in the New York Times, Friedkin called the protesters "a gang of unruly fanatics." Soho Weekly News columnist Allan Wolper warned that "The Constitution isn't stamped 'For Gays Only'.... The people leading the sit-downs and whistle-blowing against the film will lose their war for equality if they manage to win their battle for censorship."

What constitutes censorship? What constitutes self-defence? The subtleties and ambiguities had been considered. The protesters themselves were acutely aware of them. Tugging on that cable — knowing I wanted to destroy
that camera, stop the filming—I suddenly saw how it had crystallized for me. I knew exactly what I was doing.

This morning in the Ramble, though, certain questions remain. Should we have been trying to stop Cruising? Was that possible or realistic—or desirable? Should we have simply said, not in our neighbourhood, not on our streets? Should we have waited until the film is shown at theatres and planned protests then?

Because Cruising burst like a bomb in the gay community, there wasn’t always time for these and other questions to become clear. Key issues were hedged or obscured or not recognized by gay spokespeople, by the filmmakers and by the "free press" defending "free speech" without ever making connections with "free" enterprise.

Some questions can only be left open, but to others the protesters, the filmmakers and the film itself can provide answers.

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In 1969, William Friedkin directed the film version of Mart Crowley’s play, The Boys in the Band. Earlier that year gays in Greenwich Village had fought back a police attack at the Stonewall Inn, and a new generation of activists—not just “politicos” but people from throughout the gay community—protested the film’s depiction of gays as doomed queens.

Friedkin defended his film then by saying that “The Boys in the Band is not about gay life. It’s about human problems. I hope there are happy homosexuals. They just don’t happen to be in my films.” “You show me a happy homosexual,” says one character in the movie, “and I’ll show you a gay corpse.”

Cruising offers gay corpses in spades, and Friedkin is equally disingenuous in defending it. “This isn’t a film about gay life,” he told journalist Vito Russo. “It’s a murder mystery with an aspect of the gay world as background.”

Jerry Weintraub, the film’s producer, told the New York Daily News, “The gay leaders keep asking me why I don’t make a nice film about homosexuals. I don’t know what that means.”

Neither does the American public. The truth is that happy homosexuals “just don’t happen to be” in any Hollywood films—unless they go straight. The more substantially a story deals with homosexuals, the more substantially sad or sinister the film. The Boys in the Band was a sad gay melodrama with campy comic relief. Cruising is an utterly unrelieved gay horror film.

The script of Cruising, written by Friedkin, is based on a 1970 novel by Gerald Walker, an editor at the New York Times. At the time the novel appeared, gay activists asked Walker what he thought the book’s social effects would be. “Ah, it’s not my business,” he replied. A police lieutenant in the book says of gays, “They think the straight world is the enemy, but it’s themselves.” All but spoken, this remains the key message in William Friedkin’s film.

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A previous film by Friedkin, The Exorcist, portrays the gradual, gruesome possession of an amiable teenage girl by Satan. After great struggle Satan is
finally exorcised, but dark powers still lurk and loom in the world.

The script of *Cruising*, which the filmmakers kept so secret that *Village Voice* columnist Arthur Bell described it as “more difficult to come by than knowledge of Skylab's crash sites,” shows that possession and exorcism are still dominant themes for Friedkin.

In the first scene, a tugboat captain discovers “a severed gangrenous Human Arm” floating in the polluted Hudson. Later, in the city morgue, “the camera stays hypnotically on the lifeless limb” while a detective asks questions and a medical examiner deciphers on the arm a tattoo reading “Pleasure.”

Friedkin claims *Cruising* is a murder mystery, but his script contains no puzzle as to “whodunit”—“it” in this case is a series of dismemberings of gay men—only as to why.

A straight cop, played by Al Pacino, is sent out as an undercover “gay” decoy to find the killer. “How far do I have to go?” Pacino's character asks his captain. “If we send out an undercover narc, he grows a beard and long hair but he doesn’t have to become an addict.” But during his immersion in the leather and S/M bars he becomes possessed. He breaks up with his girlfriend and becomes interested in an unsuccessful gay playwright, with whose jealous lover he has a violent quarrel.

The killer is portrayed as a failed artist, but a heterosexual, a narcissist fond of musicals. Whenever moving in for the kill, he speaks in “The Voice of Jack.” The killer has a humiliating encounter with his father, and we learn that the Voice of Jack is, in fact, his father's voice. This encounter turns out to be imaginary: dad is long dead, though son continues to write him letters begging for approval. Killing exorcises the punitive father and the killer's own suspected homosexuality—briefly.

The cop and the killer finally cruise each other one night in Central Park. The killer muses nihilistically on the cosmos and “black holes,” and both then enter a dark tunnel (shades of Freud). They drop their pants. (“How big are you?” “Party size.” “What are you into?” “I'll go anywhere.” “Do me first.” “Hips or lips?” “Go for it.”) Both reach for their knives, but the cop “garrotes” the killer first. As he dies he stares, unbelieving, at the cop “in whom he sees — his father — himself.” The next script note adds that the cop is now “released. He's done his job, he's made a choice, and he's a civilized member of society.” Granting that Friedkin intended irony here, it is the first sign of it in the script, and it occurs in a parenthetical note that the director may appreciate, but the public will not see.

The cop's own exorcism appears successful, but demons lurk again when a fresh gay corpse is found—the failed writer to whom the cop had been attached. The film ends with the cop's promotion to detective and his return to his girlfriend.

Friedkin adds one touch to this story that may seem gratuitous but which in fact perforst the emasculation of a predator driven to castrate his prey. In a morgue scene a medical examiner informs the police lieutenant that one vic-
tim's anus was "dilated at the time of death" and that he found some semen. "Aspermia," he said. "No sperm. Your killer is shooting blanks." Friedkin does not have the killer dress up in the clothes of a long-dead mother; he may have refrained only because Hitchcock's Psycho beat his psycho to it.

In what may have been a concession to protests against Cruising, producer Jerry Weintraub once mentioned the possible inclusion of "a good, healthy, gay relationship" in the film. In the context of the other characters in the script, this couple would look like vegetarians in a tribe of cannibals. The few gays with any character have but two roles: killer and victim, and not even all the victims are painted in more than two dimensions. Cruising doesn't explore the lives of gay people. It murders them in sequence and exploits their deaths.

When gay activists first learned of plans to shoot Cruising in the Village, many pleaded with the filmmakers simply to consult with the gay community. In an open letter to Friedkin, journalist Doug Ireland wrote, "You didn't want to talk to anybody. Instead you went to the Mineshaft... and hired its people as consultants. Now we know that the Mineshaft is owned by two heterosexual ex-cops.... Well, since you wouldn't talk to us, we decided to talk to you — in the streets."

By early June, the film was in the second of eight weeks of on-location shooting. In his regular column in the Village Voice, Arthur Bell reported that the film promised to be "the most oppressive, ugly, bigoted look at homosexuality ever presented on the screen," and urged readers "to give Friedkin and his production crew a terrible time if you spot them in your neighbourhood."

On July 23 more than six hundred gay people packed Washington Square Methodist Church for an emergency Town Meeting, responding both to Bell's warning and to the meeting flyer which read, in part: "Cruising is a film which will encourage more violence against homosexuals. In the current climate of backlash against the gay rights movement, this movie is a genocidal act." Doug Ireland, who helped organize the meeting, later reported in the Soho Weekly News that the audience was asked how many of them had been targets of anti-gay violence within the last year, or had friends who had been. More than half raised their hands. Outside, meanwhile, a group of young toughs sharing anti-fag jokes with the cops harassed the hundred or so gays who couldn't cram into the church. The gang later got into their car and tried running people down on Christopher Street; one woman was injured in the hip.

Ireland was asked at the meeting whether protests against the film might violate free speech rights. "We're not attacking Billy Friedkin's right to make this film," he responded. "We're just telling him we don't want it made off our backs. That's not censorship, that's self-defence."

The day after the July 23 Town Meeting, gay activist Ethan Getole led a group to meet with Mayor Ed Koch and ask him to withdraw Friedkin's film permit. Koch refused. "To do otherwise," he said, "would involve censorship. It is
the business of this city's administration to encourage the return of filmmaking to New York City to whatever extent feasible with filmmakers.” When Nancy Littlefield, the city's liaison with film companies, was asked by phone if she thought *Cruising* would be good for the city and its citizens, she replied, “Anything that brings this city seven million dollars is good,” and hung up.

Koch was right: withdrawing the film permit *would* have been censorship. But Littlefield's point was lost on no one — the “principled” stand on free speech was also a very profitable one.

In an interview with Pete Hamill of New York's *Daily News*, Friedkin said, “I went to the Anvil and the Mineshaft (two Village leather bars) for three months. The guys in it seem to enjoy it; it's unique, unusual, and that's why I'm looking at it. I'm trying to capture the energy of it and the quality of ritual. I have no idea what it means to them, but it's a commitment.”

Speaking of the undercover cop in *Cruising*, Friedkin says, “He's initially repulsed, as many people might be. If you dropped a citizen of Grand Rapids into the Mineshaft, he'd probably collapse.”

Friedkin knows, of course, that good citizens will pay good money to collapse. There is a profit to be made from incomprehension and intolerance.

He takes pains to express his own tolerance: “There is no comment in this film that it is degrading or that it's wonderful — just here it is,” he told Vito Russo in an interview. “These scenes could be run as documentary footage. I don't find what goes on in these bars particularly shocking. I find myself in opposition to the gay community people who find sex bars offensive and condemn them. There's no doubt in my mind that this film won't provoke violence against gays, but I think it might very well provoke more men into this kind of life.”

A neutrality, a liberality, then, appropriate to a film on Eskimo domesticity or a flick on household plumbing — so Friedkin would have us believe. But what is “this kind of life” he portrays? Is it a kind of life we would care to see anyone provoked into? As one actor in the film, Paul Sorvino, put it: “It's dangerous to be gay.” *Cruising* presents this danger as though it were the Nature of Things rather than examining why it is dangerous to be gay in this society at this time.

If Friedkin thinks he's directed a documentary, Jerry Weintraub thinks he's produced a morality play. “What if the film serves as a warning to a young guy who comes to New York looking for a thrill? What if it says to him, don't do this stuff — go and find a good relationship.”

That young guy might like to take Uncle Jerry's advice, but *Cruising* gives no clue where to find such a relationship. It also makes S/M mythologically dangerous and evil, the medium for the message that homosexuality and homicide go together like Peggy Lee's “Love and Marriage.”

“I don't pretend to understand places like the Mineshaft,” says Friedkin. “But they exist. They are part of the world. And yes, they're violent. While I
was doing my research, there were two murders at the Anvil." What he fails to mention is that those two murders were in no way sexual. One involved a pickpocket, the other a rowdy drunk.

Since Cruising is really a horror film like The Exorcist, and since the incomprehensible is crucial to Horror, Friedkin has no profitable motive for understanding the context and meaning of gay S/M. Gay people themselves have every reason to be more comprehending.

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When gay extras were being selected for Cruising, they were asked what kind of sex acts they'd perform and in what degree of nudity. They were also asked to provide their own leather gear, and so almost all who were hired were, in fact, regular patrons of leather and S/M bars.

"I have friends in there who are extras, and I need the money just as much as they do," said one protestor at a film location. "But it's a political act to be in this film, and those people are dead wrong." I was among those who called these extras traitors.

Did we feel betrayed by these gay men being in leather in the film—or by them being in leather at all? That is, did we feel that gay S/M shouldn't be exposed, or that it shouldn't exist? Motives, like crowds, are always mixed. The extras who worked for Friedkin were indeed betraying the gay community, but the ambiguous impulses of those who called them traitors must be acknowledged.

In his book Art and Pornography, Morse Peckham writes, "it does not seem to me theoretically possible to cut more deeply into the very heart of human behaviour than does sado-masochism, for it reveals nakedly and with full intensity the adapting animal." After expressing some scepticism that loving-kindness is "naturally" human, Peckham notes, "To impose one's needs on some segment of the environment in the form of demands is aggression; submission is to permit some segment of the environment to impose its needs on oneself.... To call submission an act of will is correct, for the segment of the environment one manipulates is one's own body and one's own personality for the sake of what one judges to be one's own advantage. Actually, then, submission is really aggression...."

In contrast to Peckham's elegance and erudition, John Rechy is passionate and polemical in his book, The Sexual Outlaw. "Explore the dynamics of gay S/M: playing 'straight,' the 'S' humiliates and even tortures the 'M' for being 'queer'..." He adds, "I believe in the necessity of exploring the real, not the rationalized world of S/M. I believe the energy produced by this hatred turned inward dissipates the revolutionary energy. Redirected, refunneled, that inward anger would be converted into creative rage against the real enemies from without. The conclusion is inescapable. The motivation of the 'M'—as well as of the 'S'—is self-hatred. There is no 'S' in such gay relationships. The whimpering 'masochist' and the 'tough' posturing 'sadist' are, in reality, only two masochists groveling in self-hatred. Gay S/M is the straight world's most despicable legacy."

Rechy and Peckham represent only two points on a spectrum of polemic
and speculation about S/M, but both strive to comprehend their subject. *Cruising* exploits S/M crudely to mythologize our lives, to make them fit material for Horror. Friedkin not only reveals, but *strives for*, incomprehension.

In his *New York Times* interview, Friedkin discussed his fascination with the leather bars. “Obsession—there was true obsession in those places. All the films I’ve made deal in one way or another with characters who are obsessed, driven, perhaps sexually confused, given over to a macho image, which is generally bluff, and living on the edge of danger.”

During filming, Friedkin told Vito Russo that the killer in *Cruising* “is not gay” and the cop “doesn’t kill anybody in the film.” A crew member confided to Russo, however, that the cop *had* become a killer, and *is* gay.

But suppose the killer isn’t gay, just “sexually confused.” If queer-bashers and killers are false straights or latent queers, then true and tolerant straights are released from any complicity in crimes which *queers commit on queers*.

In reality, genuinely straight queer-bashers and killers do exist, and what they express is not only aberrant “homosexual panic.” They express, in its most intolerant form, the average sado-machismo of the average straight man.

Sado-machismo is as pervasive as God and Kleenex, can be as invisible and seem as innocuous. *It is as much the subject of Cruising as gay S/M is—if we can decipher it through the distortions produced by Friedkin’s lens.*

Sex itself is only one of the things that panic straight men about homosexuality. Beyond that panic is a deeper fear about the intimacy, the tenderness and the non-hierarchical relations such sexuality can engender between men. These are potentially subversive of the whole social hierarchy: sado-machismo cements each one of us into our “proper” place in the pyramid. It operates when dads jeer at sons for sissiness, when husbands beat and rape wives, when straight punks bash queers, when fundamentalists attack feminists — *and when we submit.*

Patriarchy would not be such an abstraction if we talked more about how sado-machismo is actually passed from father to son. A straight young Baptist recently asked me, “Don’t all gays hate their fathers? Our pastor says that’s why all gays hate God the Father.” Underlying such mythology is the fact that fathers do serve as the punitive arm of the patriarchy, having themselves been punished into loyalty. The dominant ideology about gay men is that we were punished into deviance: the penalties worked too well, producing anomalies contradictory to the rule of the fathers.

What makes the killer in *Cruising* tick? His father. Sons like the killer serve as a warning to all fathers: to punish sons *out of* deviance, *punish with care.* The terms of this warning are fictional and personal: the effect is personal and political.

*Gays can be a threat to patriarchy if we are not crushed or co-opted by it, but a positive effect can’t be explained by a negative cause. Homosexuality has its own positive social dynamic for persevering against penalties. In gay S/M interactions, the ‘S’ may signify either Sadist or Slave, the ‘M’ either Mas-
ochist or Master. A reduction of S/M to the give-and-take of pain—or to murder, as in Cruising—ignores the permutations of power which it may involve. Masochists may be masterful and sadists slavish. Often S/M involves rituals and fetishisms where there is no pain or even contact.

Cruising, however, simplifies and falsifies: gay S/M means dying and killing. The film “documents” a glance realities which require contemplation. Gay S/M roles may be “acted out” quite seriously, but they are not immutable. Friedkin was not serious in his claim that he wished “to capture the quality of ritual” in gay S/M: he confuses its consensual and reversible roles with the coerced and inflexible roles sadomachismo imposes on us in the world at large. The masks of gay S/M may sometimes mould the face, the postures may sometimes mould the person, but only rarely does the act become fact: only rarely are the roles chosen in gay S/M truly injurious or fatal. The roles sadomachismo imposes on us are often so. In Philadelphia, where I live, a cop was recently acquitted after he blew the brains out of a black teenager who was handcuffed. Many of the extras in Cruising also had handcuffs hanging from their hips, but while gay S/M may toy with that terror and may inevitably reflect the dominant context of sadomachismo, it is by no means equivalent to it.

During the protests, many gay men realized for the first time just what kind of struggle women are waging against media misogyny and abuse. Feminists at a recent conference on pornography watched a slide-show of media assaults, epitomized by a Hustler cover showing a woman being fed into a meat grinder. That kind of imagery is big business, and with its images of gay men dying with their cocks hacked off and stuffed in their mouths, so is Cruising.

When it came right down to the police barricades, Cruising had on its side Mayor Koch, mounted police and riot squads armed with guns and clubs, the film crew goons, the power of the “free press” (the New York Times, which barely noted the protests, saw fit to print a half-page of Friedkin defending the film), and, most crucially, the full power of “free enterprise.” The film’s budget was seventeen million dollars.

What did gay militance have on its side? A handful of gay journalists, a few informers from the crew, twenty extras who quit the production in disgust, fifteen hundred people at one protest, only five at another, weapons consisting of slogans, leaflets, whistles, and later eggs and bottles.

And next to no bucks. When gay bar owners exercised their free enterprise rights by covering their signs and refusing to become part of the film’s backdrop, producer Jerry Weintraub likened them to members of the Ku Klux Klan. If cops barricaded Harlem streets so that the real Klan could film a racist movie there (using either Uncle Toms or whites in black-face as extras), would it be Klannish of blacks to boycott business that collaborated with the filmmakers? Nonsense: this would be seen as community self-defence, the kind of defence gays use against a clan of straight bigots and profiteers invading their turf.
“Mass rallies and marches and sit-ins—that kind of civil disobedience is welcome, it’s important,” said Friedkin in the New York Times. “If that had been directed against Cruising, I might very well have—no, I would have been persuaded to stop filming.” Having made aliens of some of us, Friedkin tried to divide us further by pitting his idea of “welcome” protests against the “unruly fanatics” who did rally and march and sit to stop his film. The great majority were moderate and became more militant only as the situation itself grew more provocative.

Who finally initiated the violence? I don’t know, and I doubt that anyone does for sure. Some might say our puny power should never have been pitted against their great power, that doing that was in itself a delusion induced by sado-machismo, that such a confrontation could only lead to bad press, injured people and defeat. I can’t dismiss that argument: I don’t accept it, either.

I was made sick by the heads bloodied on the night of August 20, and I wasn’t thrilled to be clubbed myself. But our puny power was sufficient for Stonewall. Defeat followed that occasion in the sense that business-as-usual was restored. But, in fact, oppressive Law and Order were from then on increasingly challenged. Without such a “defeat” as Stonewall, how could we have gone on to other victories? Though we disrupted some scenes, Friedkin finished filming in the Village, and Cruising is scheduled for distribution in February, 1980. A defeat? Only for those who imagined they could fight this skirmish with free enterprise as though it were the whole campaign.

Years ago, Hannah Arendt roused a storm of protest when she wrote of “the banality of evil” embodied in a man like the Nazi criminal Eichmann. Gay people on both sides of the barricades were called Nazis, the protesters for their tactics, the S/M extras for their lives. If we are to know our enemies, we’d better not make a Nazi of Friedkin. But Arendt’s insight is useful in understanding him: he’s an extremely banal man. Nothing “alien” is human to him. He’s not greatly evil himself; he’s just one of those people who makes great evil possible.

Will the film directly provoke murders, as some claimed, or was this simply “rousing” rhetoric? Direct cause and effect is usually hard to prove, but films like Cruising can charge an already stormy atmosphere so that lightning finally strikes “at random.” And the messages such a film carries help to keep us fearful and in our “proper” place in the hierarchy of power.

We have already recognized that industry cannot be allowed to pollute our environment “freely,” and anti-nuclear activists have already moved from symbolic action to actual obstruction. The cultural environment is also full of ideological radiation. We have good grounds for viewing the film industry as an abused public utility, good grounds for demanding resources to make our own films. With a budget of seventeen million dollars going for Cruising, pulling a production cable was little more than a symbolic act. But it was one way to say we won’t let free enterprise monopolize free speech.

Defend free speech? To be sure. But often you must create it first. The surest defence of such rights as now exist will come from those working for
economic democracy. The right to say what one wants means little to those who haven't got the bucks—and the power that comes from these bucks—to make themselves heard. Free speech costs. So far, most people can't afford it.

In one newspaper report, a frustrated protester at a film site was quoted as saying, "There's only one way to stop Cruising, and that's to stop cruising."

If we stop cruising, then Cruising will have stopped us. Is there any good reason why the streets and parks should not be safe for simple gay sociability? Even for sex? Women have long feared to walk the streets at night, knowing the risk of rape, knowing how cops and courts blame the victims. But now women are marching en masse to demonstrate that they will "Take Back the Night." Certainly gay people should respond with equal courage.

I remember the first time I visited the Anvil bar. A young man was bound on stage and was getting fist-fucked by a burly man in a leather hood. The young man couldn't take it; he said so, and the hooded man stopped, unbound him and took off his hood. They smiled at each other and then kissed.

Where are the films that show this reality? Where are the films that would explore the ambivalence about sexual submission and domination? Where are the films that might present the positive aspects of the rough-and-ready communalism of backroom bars, beaches, parks, instead of "documenting" such sexuality merely to shock a public which is fanatical about the "private nature" of sex? Such shocks are calculated to bring profit, for they confirm rather than challenge foolish and resentful morality.

That day in the Ramble I met a beautiful blond dancer, a boy from Texas. We sucked and fucked and did not castrate or knife each other. Friedkin has made two films about gay men focusing on physical and emotional wounds. He does not turn the camera on himself, on the weapons hewields against us. He doesn't care to show gay affirmation, gay resistance, the thousands of everyday acts by which we survive and love each other.

Of what Cruising shows, William Friedkin says, "It's there. It exists. It's the truth." But "It" is simply a pantheon of tired archetypes—doomed queens and sinister freaks. Such archetypes have shaped our lives. To recognize stereotypes is to demystify archetypes: it is to change our lives. If we must inevitably live by one mythology or another, let's at least have a choice in creating our own.

When we protested in the streets, that's what we were trying to say. We're here. We exist. We, too, are the truth.