

C A L I F O R N I A I N S T I T U T E O F T E C H N O L O G Y

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CRUISING: HARD TO SWALLOW, BUT IMPORTANT MEDICINE

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"Cruising" may well prove to be the most hated movie of the decade. It is already the most misunderstood. The film has been criticized as being anti-gay, artistically inept and senselessly violent. These criticisms are not without substance; but to concentrate on them while ignoring the film's deeper implications is like criticizing a Beckett novel for its sketchy plot.

The film draws its power from the peculiar subculture it portrays. Set in the "heavy leather" part of gay life, the bar scenes that are the heart of the film reveal a brutally frank trade in sexual goods and services. Jock-strapped muscular men dance together, packed tight in a swelter whose rankness you can almost smell, sweat, sperm, and vaseline mingling with the ubiquitous black leather of jackets, caps, masks. The sense of menace in this milieu is overwhelming. Its essence lies in stripping away the civilizing, mediating approaches to sexual transaction. Eyes stare at face and genitals, sizing up the prospects, accepting or rejecting with minimal preliminaries. A phrase or two and the bargain is struck, the partners leave for a brief encounter that for the few selected by the killer will end in a terrifying mingling of sex and death.

For a generation anesthetized by nearly every kind of sex and violence imaginable, why should these scenes be so deeply disturbing? Their effect goes beyond the unaccustomed spectacle of

men fucking men, beyond the bizarre props of bondage and discipline, beyond even the gore of the murders themselves. At the heart of the visceral reaction these scenes provoke is a view of sexuality so distorted that it is scarcely recognizable as human. The absence of women from this world is symbolic, for the nurturing that is one aspect of sexual function has been completely exercised. With any sign of tenderness or caring utterly repressed, hostility and aggression become the normative sexual response. What in the larger society appears pathologically as rape is accepted in this society as the underlying principle not merely of sexual interaction, but of the social life itself. In the film's world of heavy leather, violence is not anomalous. It is inevitable.

This kind of expanding significance is typical of how "Cruising" achieves its effect. What begins as a murder mystery or a cops-and-robbers thriller soon begins to take on more complex significance as connections emerge between the culture and the aberrations it spawns. After each murder the killer whispers to his mutilated victim, "You made me do it." At first the response seems to epitomize the killer's psychotic reasoning, a classic case of blame-the-victim. But we come to realize that there is a deeper truth here; the murders are the logical end point of the society's chosen mode of interaction.

Even more chilling is the slow realization that this mode of interaction, once released, acquires a momentum of its own. Al Pacino (Steve Burns, alias John Forbes), the undercover policeman who tracks the killer through the heavy leather scene, starts out

as an ordinary guy. He is a man with a decent job, a good woman, a normal life. But as he descends into this underworld in quest of the killer, he begins to become absorbed by it. In an extraordinary performance, Pacino suggests this subtle change by the very way he moves. In the early scenes he is an observer barely able to control his fear and loathing. Later, as he becomes caught up in the same dynamic that spawns the killer, he is not observing the scene any longer. He is in it.

As the exposure to heavy leather begins to affect Pacino, he is unable to sustain the heterosexual relation he has with Karen Allen (Nancy). It is understandable that Pacino, under the strain of living a double life, should temporarily opt out of the one tie he has maintained with normality. But there is a more sinister interpretation for his inability to respond; his experiences have begun to change his patterns of erotic arousal. Shortly before Pacino breaks up with his woman, there is a shot of them in bed, making love. As her head slides down his torso and off screen, Pacino's face becomes anguished. The stimulus is too familiar, too closely connected with what he observes nightly in the bars. It becomes increasingly clear that in addition to the physical danger Pacino faces, there is a subtler psychological threat: he is undergoing a transformation.

Cut off entirely from his ordinary life, cruising at night, living by day in a cheap rooming house catering to gays, Pacino's one source of human warmth is his friendship with Don Scardino (Ted Bailey), the gay playwright living next door. When

the friendship is abruptly interrupted by the return of Ted's roommate and live-in lover, Pacino goes out of control. He smashes against the door that the jealous roommate has slammed in his face, stopping only when the roommate pulls a knife. Implicit in Pacino's fury is his unacknowledged sexual attraction to his gay friend and his sexual jealousy of the lover. When Pacino goes directly from this episode to his final confrontation with the killer, the link is established between his anger, a passion he cannot admit because it runs counter to his male image, and its final expression in a homosexual encounter that both the pursuer and pursued recognize as an inextricable mixture of sex, hatred, fear and violence.

Not least among the film's powerful effects is its pacing. It alternately builds and relaxes tension in a manner reminiscent of Hitchcock. After each momentary release the tension mounts higher, culminating in the confrontation between Pacino and the killer he has come to resemble. Then it is deflated, but in a way that leads directly into a more subtle anxiety. The relief of having the killer apprehended is cut short when Pacino's boss Paul Sorvino (Captain Edelson) urges the killer to confess to the three most recent murders and "four or five others we think you are involved in," assuring him that if he does so he will have his sentence reduced to eight years in prison. This is followed by a conversation between Captain Edelson and Pacino, during which Pacino learns that he too will have to face a trial to clear himself of stabbing the killer. In a turn similar to "The Onion Field,"

the catharsis of seeing the killer finally get his ebbs away in a muddle of legal ambiguities. But these scenes, it turns out, are merely preparation for ambiguities of a more startling kind. Still to come is the revelation that the cancer of sex-as-violence, and of violence as a perverse form of sex, has acquired an independent life of its own; it continues to grow even though the killer has been stopped. The shocks begin when the scene shifts back to the rooming house, where a routine murder investigation is under way. A blood-covered body with multiple stab wounds has been discovered; it is Ted Bailey, Pacino's gay friend. The cop on the beat seeks to assure Captain Edelson that it was probably "just a lover's quarrel" between Ted and his now-missing roommate. But this cop is the same one we have seen cruising at night, not only in the patrol car but in the heavy leather bars and parks, looking for action of a different sort -- or ultimately of the same sort that has reduced a gentle, loving human being to the bloody body lying on the floor. The Captain, like us, has all the information he needs to make the connections when he learns that the room next door was occupied by the very man who apprehended the killer and who has apparently, in a mysterious way, taken on the personality of the man he hunted. The growing horror on the Captain's face is silent testimony to the ghastly picture that emerges.

In the final scenes the cancer continues to grow, involving woman as well as man, heterosexual and homosexual alike. The realization that the malignancy is spreading begins with what should be the reassuring sight of Pacino returning to his woman.

Announcing "I'm back," Pacino occupies himself with shaving while Nancy puts on the music that has been their love-making theme. As she idly waits for him to be done, she walks over to the chair where he has laid his cruising outfit. Fascinated, she tries on the mirror sunglasses, the black leather cap, the heavy leather jacket. . . . In the bathroom Pacino hears footsteps approaching, which at once become the sound of his lover, the clinking of the heavy keys that inevitably accompanies his cruising, and a mixture of their lovemaking music with the cruising theme. As he stares at himself in the mirror, he begins to realize that coming back is impossible. The cancer follows him, surrounds him, is him.

Were this all that "Cruising" did, it would be enough. But along with this central theme of a skewed masculinity that, by refusing to admit the feminine part of itself, initiates a self-sustaining and growing cycle of brutality, aggression and murder, is symbol-making of a very sophisticated variety. Perhaps the clearest clue to Friedkin's deliberate symbolism occurs when Pacino breaks into and searches the killer's apartment. Pacino finds the trappings of guilt -- leather jackets, a knife, suspicious letters -- that he needs as evidence. But as he opens a book lying on a dresser and the camera focuses on the pages, we are presented with evidence of a different kind. The book is Word and Image, an edited collection of works by the late C.G. Jung. Although we are not told so in the movie, the pages that Pacino sees are reproductions of paintings done by Jung, representations of fantasies he had during six years of solitary meditation. It is

unlikely that our glimpse of these pages is accidental. They provide a key to the deeper meaning of the shadow symbolism that pervades "Cruising".

One of the two pages depicts a diabolical figure shrouded in black capes and hat. Jung wrote that this was his rendering of his own "shadow". The other picture shows, against a dark ground, a fierce serpent wrapped around a golden mandala. In Jungian psychology, the mandala symbolizes the effort to reunify the self; Jung intended this painting to signify finding "light at the core of darkness."

According to Jungian theory, all humans have a repressed alter ego, the shadow. Containing many of our animal drives and instincts, the shadow is a powerful, potentially dangerous force. Ideally, as we mature we learn to use these primitive urges in creative ways. But in our culture, expressions of our animal nature are punished by parents and society and retreat into the unconscious. They do not disappear for good, but remain beneath the surface of civilized personalities. As adults, we have two choices for dealing with the repressed shadow. We may ignore it; but then it will, from time to time, break through in sinister, pathological ways. Such eruption, Jung believed, is an inevitable consequence of neglecting a normal part of the psyche. The other choice is to confront the shadow, do battle with it, and incorporate its vitality into conscious awareness. Enlightenment and wholeness are won not by imagining figures of light, Jung said, but by engaging the shadows that hover on the periphery of consciousness. "Cruising"

presents one version of the encounter with darkness.

Appearing in the myths and legends of many cultures, the attempt to find and confront the dark side of ourselves seems to be nearly universal. In the archetypal quests of myth, the hero sets out on a lonely pilgrimage during which he becomes acquainted not only with his shadow, but also with death. Although the myths vary, they commonly portray a humble man who must leave behind the security and familiarity of the known to journey into unknown territory, finally engaging a powerful alien being in physical combat. Sometimes the hero wins the battle; at other times victory comes only through the ritual sacrifice of the hero's life. Both the victory and ritual death, however, symbolize a rebirth into new consciousness.

"Cruising" represents a modern and sinister variation of this ancient quest. Pacino, an ordinary man, is asked to perform an extraordinary task. He must abandon his identity, especially his heterosexual orientation, to travel into the underworld of S & M. The light airy whiteness of the apartment he shares with Nancy is increasingly displaced by the dim subterranean leather bars, the black jackets and masks, the deep nights of the streets and parks where the cruisers rendezvous.

As Pacino is absorbed into this nether world, he gradually adopts the gaze, the swagger, the language, perhaps even the homosexual preference of the men who surround him. When the anguish of this assimilation becomes too much to bear, Pacino pleads with Captain Edelson to relieve him of the seemingly impossible assignment.

Edelson refuses, and Pacino runs down the steps away from him in what proves to be an irrevocable break with the world he has known. That night, Pacino undergoes a symbolic initiation ritual when he finally accepts an invitation to dance. His movements are uninhibited, forceful, sexual. Now he meets directly and unabashedly the eyes of those who observe him. Ostensibly the immersion is necessary so that he can do his job; but its totality goes beyond duty. The completeness of Pacino's surrender prepares him for the encounter with his shadow, and hints at its devastating outcome.

As Pacino moves closer to confrontation, the shadows in "Cruising" gather force. The shadow of the killer's knife rises and falls against the backdrop of a pornographic movie; its outline dominates the X-rays the coroner shows of the victims' stab wounds. Increasingly, human interactions are portrayed as encounters between dimly outlined figures or disembodied voices. When Pacino trails the killer to their final meeting, the metaphor becomes reality. He is, literally, in the killer's shadow.

When we remember that to meet the shadow is to meet the self, it is not surprising that identities become confused. We cannot finally distinguish the hero from the killer, the hunter from the prey. Pacino and the killer have become ghostly doubles, döppelgangers. With great economy, Friedkin prepares us for this disturbing mingling of identity almost from the beginning. The first time we see Pacino with his woman, they are conversing desultorily in bed. She tells him, "Your father called." "Oh?"

he responds, and the sinister bass notes of the cruising music come up under the lighter, higher strings of their love-making theme. The scene remains puzzling until later in the film when it connects with a fantasy sequence revealing the origin of the killer's psychopathology. Central to the killer's deranged sense of mission is his relationship with a father now ten years dead, but still unforgivingly and implacably alive in the killer's delusionary world. The revelation illuminates in retrospect Pacino's ambiguous reaction to the mention of his own father. What was subliminally present in the mingling of the musical themes surfaces into the conscious recognition that the two men are moving not only toward a shared destiny, but toward a shared identity.

Through the symbolic quest for the shadow that is a mirror of the self, Friedkin widens the significance of the action far beyond the surface tale of a rampaging murderer and his final apprehension by a dedicated policeman. The real plot is psychological and internal, a parable for a society that does not like to examine too closely its symptoms of illness. The real disease is not homosexuality, not even of the heavy leather variety. Its essence lies in our refusal to recognize that the human psyche contains both masculine and feminine elements, our refusal to accept human sexuality as a continuum and not a matter for rigid role definition. Jung is pertinent here, as he is to so much of the film, for he believed that one part of the male psyche is an anima, that, utterly repressed in the brutally

macho world of heavy leather, revenges herself by erupting in the sinister power displays of a denied unconscious.

The tragedy of Pacino's quest is not that he fails to engage the shadow, but that in our society he cannot integrate it within himself to become a whole person. After Pacino's last conversation with Captain Edelson, there is a sudden cut to the midnight world of cruising where a shadowy figure -- perhaps Pacino -- enters the now familiar underground bar. The abrupt transition is symbolic. It hints that Pacino's life, like the killer's, has become radically bifurcated into the daylight world of normal life and the dark underworld of heavy leather. Although he has been released from his assignment, Pacino cannot be released from the need to give way to the repressed shadow. Denied during the daytime, it emerges pathologically at night. But the shadow cannot be altogether confined to the realm of darkness. It keeps returning to the daylight world through the mutilated corpses that refuse to go away.

All this implies that "Cruising," rightly understood, is not anti-gay. On the contrary, "Cruising" reveals the devastating consequences for both gays and straights of refusing to accept the complexity of human sexuality. What "Cruising" insists upon in its repeated violent assaults on our senses is that denying the parts of ourselves that our society chooses not to validate -- whether it be homosexuality, femininity or the unconscious -- condemns us to the growing cycle of horrors that "Cruising" so vividly depicts.

Although we are fascinated by "Cruising," we are not entirely comfortable with it. We are not sure how accurately it represents the heavy leather subculture. Surely this shadowy group theater, as one friend described the cruising scene, is played in real life by men who have many traditional and valuable relationships during other waking hours. In the film we are not allowed to see cruisers as whole human beings. Even if this myopia is indulged for artistic purposes, there are other concerns. Not to be denied are the fears of gays and straights alike that the film will inflame an already growing homophobia in this country. Should art that can encourage discrimination against a minority be praised? Should an artist be held responsible when he creates something that can be so misunderstood or misused? Can we applaud such a creation, however profound, if it serves to brutalize its viewers by its incessant violence?

To these difficult moral issues there can be no single definitive answer. But we can at least clarify them by paying closer attention to what the film attempts to represent. Jung himself said that our salvation lies in making the darkness conscious, but that the process will be disagreeable and therefore unpopular. In making "Cruising," Friedkin has alienated just about every group who could otherwise be expected to applaud a daring and courageous film. In the absence of any natural constituency, "Cruising" may sink into oblivion before it has had a fair hearing. But a film that can touch us this deeply -- even

if we react to its probing by becoming angry, denying or dismissing it -- is saying something important. If you decide to see it, it will stay with you for a long, long time.