Motifs
ISSN : 2726-0399

9 | 2025
Trouble on Screen

Provocateur or Documentarian? Revisiting William Friedkin's Troublesome 1980s in *Cruising* and *Rampage*

Chris Horn

https://lodelpreprod.univ-rennes2.fr/motifs/index.php?id=1217

DOI : 10.56078/motifs.1217

Référence électronique
Chris Horn, « *Provocateur* or Documentarian? Revisiting William Friedkin's Troublesome 1980s in *Cruising* and *Rampage* », *Motifs* [En ligne], 9 | 2025, mis en ligne le , consulté le 22 septembre 2026. URL : https://lodelpreprod.univ-rennes2.fr/motifs/index.php?id=1217

Droits d'auteur
Licence Creative Commons – Attribution 4.0 International – CC BY 4.0

Provocateur or Documentarian? Revisiting William Friedkin's Troublesome 1980s in *Cruising* and *Rampage*

Chris Horn

PLAN

Protests against *Cruising*
Support for *Cruising*
Cruising and the Censors
Researching *Rampage*
Protests against *Rampage*
Conclusion

TEXTE

1 The study of American film history has tended to characterise the 1980s according to a narrow, singular model that foregrounds the importance of White House occupancy and box-office hits[1]. Such an emphasis has meant that it is often missed that, as Stephen Prince observed about the decade, "Hollywood *itself* was attacked for films that were unacceptably lewd, bigoted or sacrilegious" (emphasis in original) (xvi). *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988) was the most notorious example of the latter and *Dressed to Kill* (Brian De Palma, 1980) was subjected to protests against its misogynistic violence; but an especially infamous example that was attacked in public and in the press for its bigotry was William Friedkin's *Cruising* (1980). The film, set in New York's gay leather scene, managed to upset not only gay activists and homophobes alike, but also the censors and theatre owners as well. This article concentrates on *Cruising*'s director because he seems particularly emblematic of the tensions in the 1980s between the personal approach of auteur filmmakers and the decade's prevailing populism and conformity. Friedkin's career had been (and continues to be) defined by the extraordinary fame and influence of two films he made consecutively in 1971 and 1973: *The French Connection* and *The Exorcist*. As Larry Gross put it in 1995 when he considered the

director's steep career decline: "it's tough now even to grasp how completely Friedkin's two early successes helped create the idiom of serious/popular Hollywood filmmaking over the last twenty-five years" (14). As with a number of the other filmmakers associated with the "Hollywood Renaissance" of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Friedkin's reputation, and subsequent ability to get films made in Hollywood, was fatally undermined by one specific catastrophic failure. The financial disaster of *Sorcerer* (1977), a remake of Henri Clouzot's *The Wages of Fear* (1953), preceded the more notorious examples of both *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Coppola, 1979) and *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980). Indeed, the difficulty in the marketplace of the late 1970s of making the sort of cinema associated with the Hollywood Renaissance was brought into sharp relief when *Sorcerer*'s release date in May 1977 fell on exactly the same day as the first *Star Wars* film (Segaloff 170).

2 By the end of the 1970s, Friedkin was already no stranger to controversy, having received well-publicised criticism for the perceived blasphemy in *The Exorcist* as well as for the extravagant overspend of *Sorcerer* (Segaloff 147-149, 155-172). This article examines Friedkin's seemingly unerring ability to attract trouble by interrogating the motivations that governed his actions. This is achieved through the examination of some of the difficulties that plagued two 1980s films: *Cruising*, that was more controversial than successful on its initial release, and Friedkin's most obscure and least seen film, *Rampage*, which was only shown twice in the United States (in Boston and Los Angeles) when completed in 1987, before a fuller but still limited, and entirely unsuccessful, domestic release in 1992 (Clagett 311). One of the principal ways that I am able to offer a fresh perspective on these matters is through the use of archival material from Friedkin's papers lodged at the Margaret Herrick library in Los Angeles.

3 Friedkin began his career working in documentaries and one of the most consistent aspects of his directing career is his determined approach to research and authenticity. In this regard, he has often been drawn to narratives that are based on the real-life experiences of those who fulfilled roles depicted in the fictional narratives. This resolve to achieve a high degree of verisimilitude has led Friedkin towards controversy on a number of occasions. At the same time, his troubles also resulted from his notoriously combative personality.

Walon Green, who wrote *Sorcerer* and *The Brink's Job* (1978) for Friedkin, observed about the major Hollywood studios: "They hated Billy [Friedkin]. They were thrilled when he started bombing" (Biskind 413). It is therefore unsurprising that Friedkin mostly found employment in the independent sector in the 1980s.

4 This article continues the critical reappraisal of *Cruising* that followed a brief re-run in 1998 and then a DVD release in 2007[2]. In 1980, however, the negative publicity that dogged the film's route to market had both the effect of overwhelming much consideration of the film's intrinsic qualities, and of setting in stone its problematic subsequent reputation resulting from the perception that its portrayal of an alternative sub-culture is characterised by violence and sexual debauchery. The result has been that it has been rarely noticed that, even at the time of its making and release, the film had its supporters, both from within and outside of the gay community. Correspondence from the archives allows a more balanced understanding of the film's public and institutional reception and complicates notions of Friedkin's responsibility. *Cruising*'s troubles continued after its release as well and the public and protracted row between the censors and the filmmakers is also considered, particularly because it is illustrative of the types of censorship issues that at this particular point in history was of concern for the various interested parties: the public, filmmakers and the appointed guardians of moral standards. At the same time, the largely unknown difficulties that Friedkin endured, in the form of a letter writing campaign when he was making *Rampage*, are yet another example of what seems an uncanny aptitude for attracting trouble. On that occasion, at least, it does seem that the director was not as blameworthy.

5 Both *Cruising* and *Rampage* (and also 1985's *To Live and Die in L.A.*) are linked by the nature of the source materials on which they were based, and by the insider knowledge upon which they all relied. Friedkin's choices relate to his background in documentaries with his approach to authenticity underpinning his explorations of contemporary American society. *Cruising* was based on a dubious 1970 novel of the same name by Gerald Walker that has been vilified for its homophobic undertones (Simon 69). Friedkin used the novel's basic narrative but altered it completely by refashioning it to incorporate ideas drawn from recent real-life events, and from the experiences of

an undercover policeman, Randy Jurgensen (who advised Friedkin on *The French Connection*). *To Live and Die*, a high-energy thriller, was based on a novel written by Gerald Petievich that fictionalised his own experiences as a Secret Service agent, like the films' protagonists. *Rampage* was a similar situation, with the source novel by William Wood also based on his former profession as a Deputy District Attorney — again like the film's leading character. Even another 1980s Friedkin film, *Deal of the Century* (1983) — a lame star vehicle for Chevy Chase, Friedkin's only studio production in the decade and the only time he did not write the screenplay — was initially meant to maintain his insistence on an authentic *mise-en-scène*. This was effectively scuppered when a loan of aircraft from the armed forces failed to materialise. An internal memo reveals that the production had proceeded under a false impression because of "a misquote about approval by Department of Defence and Department of Navy. Neither did in fact" (Yorkin). Even when he used a screenplay by someone else, in this case by Paul Brickman, Friedkin was not satisfied with relying on others. When he was solely responsible for the writing (as on *Cruising* and *Rampage*), he used the source novels as a point of departure for the undertaking of extensive research. While not operating at a Kubrickian level of deep research, the archives do show that Friedkin read up and consulted widely on the sort of procedural matters and real-life events that might inform his scripts. He always strove to depict realistic representations of the subject matter under consideration.

Protests against *Cruising*

6 Some years before *Cruising* was actually made, Friedkin had been approached by *French Connection* producer, Philip D'Antoni about making a film from Walker's novel, the rights of which he had just purchased. The story, inspired by a series of unsolved murders in 1969, was about a policeman going undercover in New York's affluent gay community to investigate a serial killer and becoming a murderer himself as he becomes overwhelmed by his homosexual urges. Its essentially homophobic nature was of little interest for Friedkin: "I didn't think much of it [and] I wasn't compelled to make it into a film at that time" (Simon 69). D'Antoni then managed to briefly pique the interest of Steven Spielberg before selling the property to the inde-

pendent producer Jerry Weintraub (who had made his name with Robert Altman's acclaimed 1975 film, *Nashville*). In 1979, Weintraub once again approached Friedkin about making a film from Walker's book (ibid). After working on *The Brink's Job* essentially as a hired hand, Friedkin was keen to apply himself to a project over which he had creative control. He now had some ideas to combine Walker's book with a number of other sources. Firstly, there were the fascinating tales Jurgensen had told him about going undercover in the early 1960s to apprehend uniformed men, possibly police officers, who were blackmailing, and potentially murdering, homosexuals (Clagett 238-239). He had also just read a January 1979 piece by Arthur Bell in *Village Voice*, "Another Murder at the Anvil", which described two murders in four months at a gay club in New York's meat-packing district (Bell). Another factor was that Friedkin had heard rumours of a series of unexplained deaths in the gay community that would later turn out to be the start of the AIDS epidemic (Simon 69). All this now prompted Friedkin to accept the offer to make *Cruising*. He reversed his earlier decision because he could now see how he could transpose Walker's novel to the underground leather scene, which featured in both Jurgensen and Bell's stories.

7 *Cruising* is a radical portrait of a sub-culture that, according to Mark Kermode, "broke all the existing taboos of mainstream cinematic sex with its frank, tactile portrait of an exotic, erotic underworld" (22). In keeping with his beginnings in documentary filmmaking, and to capture this scene's febrile atmosphere, Friedkin carried out copious research in a search for authenticity. So that he could go 'cruising' himself, he managed to obtain introductions and protection from the dubious gangster types who owned the New York leather bars, including the infamous Genovese crime-family member, Matty "The Horse" Ianniello (Bailey 2). When he immersed himself in the scene, he observed: "I wasn't bothered that much… I was just another fat Jew in a jockstrap" (Segaloff 169). The Bacchanalian depiction of this life was inevitably likely to attract a certain amount of negative attention, but the filmmakers never could have anticipated the level of opprobrium that the film generated. Although the strength of the protests was unexpected, Friedkin could hardly have been surprised that the film was contentiously received. Its extraordinarily frank depiction of the highly sexualised leather scene seems to be a overt

act of provocation, a deliberate strategy, perhaps, to raise public awareness of the film. The graphic nature of *Cruising*'s depiction of sado-masochistic practices was calculated, as Friedkin admitted to Linda Ruth Williams in 2004, to "get away with stuff most people weren't getting way with – I wanted to see how far I could push the envelope" (19).

8 *Cruising*'s portrayal of one section of homosexual culture as an environment that fosters murderers gathered a range of objections from both homophobes and homosexuals, albeit, of course, for very different reasons. While there was bound to be resistance to any portrayal of homosexual life from conservative quarters at this time, it was the gay community who rallied together to create problems for *Cruising*'s production. Before it had been completed, the film had already acquired a badge of notoriety when organised protests were staged during its filming on New York streets. An early version of the script had leaked and this resulted in the protestors believing that the film would make correlations between homosexuality and homicidal tendencies. Arthur Bell, whose original story had been one of the inspirations for the film's narrative in the first place, was one of the most vocal opponents of the film and regularly railed against the film in his "Bell Tolls" column in *Village Voice*. The extent of his anger on the subject became yet more apparent during the protests on 25 July 1979 when a radio bulletin direct from the streets reported that "Bell looked right into the camera and said they should do violence to any of the crew they saw" (Van Dorn). The concerted attempts made to obstruct the filming taking place on the New York streets generated huge publicity with regular reports on radio and television news, and in the pages of broadsheet newspapers from both sides of the continent [3]. In later versions of the script, there is evidence of Friedkin seeming to have responded to the protestors' concerns. A few lines not in early drafts clearly seek to mitigate any impression that the sub-culture depicted is typical of gay society. The detective in charge, Edelson (Paul Sorvino) tells the film's protagonist, Steve Burns (Al Pacino), when sending him undercover, that both victims "were not in the mainstream of gay life. They were into heavy leather, S & M. It's a whole different way of life" (Friedkin, *Cruising*). A more obvious attempt to appease the protesters was to begin the film with a similarly motivated, if ill-advised, disclaimer: "The film is not

intended as an indictment of the homosexual world. It is set in one small segment of that world, which is not meant to be representative of the whole" (Segaloff 194)[4]. Feelings ran high about the film and some of the hate mail in the archives illustrates this well, even if it was not always entirely rationally expressed. One particularly crazed example from Max Karnick tells Friedkin:

> I have not seen a movie since *Zhivago*, never heard of William Friedkin… "that door" [homosexuality] should have remained shut in the closet – so "they" could all suffocate and then drop them into the Hudson River… to save a lot of morgue effeuse [sic][5].

9 In fairness, the letters from supporters also sometimes read as similarly deranged, with Stefan Fitterman, who appears to have advised Friedkin on gay life in New York, comparing the reactions to *Cruising* to Nazism:

> Is there any difference between "burn the movie" and "burn the Jews"? More frightening were words painted on streets and buildings, "stop the movie *Cruising*" – so close to "Juden"… another example of growing fascist tendencies in the US… I do salute your efforts. Above and beyond any political movement, there is the truth (underlining in original).

Support for *Cruising*

10 The publicity surrounding the film's production seems to have stimulated a strong opening, but its critical reception was (nearly) unanimously negative, often even hostile. The tone of the reviews was so extreme that a college professor, George Grella, who doubled as a film critic for his local paper, was prompted to send Friedkin his positive review which was unequivocal in its praise: "it constructs some of the harshest, subtlest, and most complex metaphors for our life and time that I have ever seen" (Grella '*Cruising*'). In his accompanying letter, Grella tells the director that "I wanted you to see that at least *someone* reviewed *Cruising* as a movie instead of as some sort of perverse ideological statement" (Grella "Letter to Friedkin"). Even more indicative of the extent of the adverse reactions to the film was that Friedkin took the trouble to write back, telling Grella that his was

"the most perceptive review I've seen of the film. I agree with your conclusions and I'm grateful to you for going against the grain" (Friedkin, "Letter to Grella"). Another supportive, if naïve, letter writer suspects a critical conspiracy and encloses one review from the *Westchester Rockland Newspaper* which described *Cruising* as evidence: "as close to a piece of cinematic excrement as any film I've seen" (Prete).

11 The wave of negativity that dominated *Cruising*'s public discourse at this time obscures how more balanced views were also expressed and the film certainly had its supporters. So, when the editor of gay magazine *Mandate* reported from the set in the February 1980 issue, he observed:

> More than 1600 gay men participated in the filming of *Cruising*... significantly fewer gays protested the filming. The men who frequent the world being depicted... were in the movie, and did not object to their world being depicted... Many felt that the protests were as much a protest against the leather world itself as they are a protest against Friedkin's film. (Bailey 3-4)

12 Indeed, the delight of these extras in depicting their lifestyle in all its splendour is palpable in the film. Friedkin received a number of letters from those who worked on it thanking him for a great experience. One particularly effusive example said: "I do believe in freedom of artistic expression and *Cruising* may, in some way, come to represent just such a freedom" (Williams K). In the face of the public disruption, it is notable that Friedkin also received significant support from the city authorities. The director was sufficiently grateful to pen letters of thanks to both Nancy Littlefield, the mayor's movie liaison, and to Mayor Ed Koch himself. To Littlefield he wrote that, "without your assistance, we couldn't have made the film" (Friedkin, "Letter to Littlefield"). To Koch, he expressed "appreciation for the support... and my apologies for any discomfort... though it would seem the 1st amendment issue was clear, I know yours was a moral stance, not necessarily the most politically expedient. I am grateful for your fairness, guidance and cooperation" (Friedkin,"Letter to Koch").

13 Not absolutely everyone subscribed to the critical consensus and a notable exception was Robin Wood who, in an article for *Movie*

in 1980 (reprinted in his 1986 book), vowed "to do some justice to *Cruising*… it has received none so far" (52).Wood's "The Incoherent Text: Narrative in the '70s" (not necessarily a pejorative term as Wood explains it) considers *Cruising*'s complicated and ambiguous narrative construction and its contentious portrayal of the leather-bar milieu alongside an examination of *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) and *Looking for Mr Goodbar* (Richard Brooks, 1977). Wood invokes an auteurist perspective when he argues that these three films achieve "a certain level of distinction [by] exhibit[ing] a large degree of involvement on the part of their makers" (42). Nevertheless, having been largely unavailable and reviled for years, it was only when *Cruising* was given a further theatrical run in 1998, and then a DVD release in 2007, that the film enjoyed something of a critical and cultural rehabilitation. Of course, societal attitudes towards homosexuality have changed immeasurably in the time since, which has contributed to this re-appraisal, particularly regarding the film's portrayal of gay life. In 2018, Jason Bailey commented that "in the decades that followed, something curious happened. Critics – particularly gay critics – revisited *Cruising*, and came to find value in it through the lens of (ironically enough) representation" (4). Paul Burston had already argued in 1998 that 'the film is now part of queer film history and a testament to how a frightened Hollywood treated a disenfranchised minority… reactions to *Cruising* say as much about the time when they were written as about the film itself… despite the fact that it is not really a film "about homosexuality" at all' (24).

14 The controversies that swirled around the production and reception of *Cruising* can be seen, to some degree at least, to be attributable to the actions and behaviour of its writer-director, but it also suffered from word-of-mouth anxieties that were not necessarily based on what was in the actual film. Objections were stridently and publicly expressed, with the print and broadcast media playing a role in generating headlines that inevitably tended to obscure any opposing opinion. As we have seen, this support included the members of the community that was supposedly being misrepresented in the film. The debates surrounding *Cruising* exposed tensions between the fair representation of minority cultures and the expression of free speech (as laid down in the 1st amendment of the American Constitution). Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that the

film's ability to represent the culture it depicts in a nuanced manner was always going to be difficult because, as Bailey observed, "Friedkin remained an aloof observer of gay life and *Cruising* was undeniably a script written from a straight, Other-ing perspective" (2).

Cruising and the Censors

15 After filming was completed, *Cruising* still continued to appear regularly in the press because of a very public, somewhat protracted row between Weintraub and Friedkin on one side and the censors on the other, a furor that actually only arose after the film's initial rating and release. The film was clearly pushing against the limits of acceptability at the time and a number of theatre chains, including the country's largest, General Cinema Corp. (GCC), refused to show it because the film's 'R' rating was seen by many to be unduly lenient (Prince 346). It is this that seems to have prompted the row that emerged between Richard Heffner, the Chairman of the Classification and Ratings Administration and the filmmakers. Again, the broadsheets, as with the protests during production, kept the dispute in the public domain [6]. After an article by Dale Pollock in the *Los Angeles Times* in which Heffner implied that the filmmakers had misled the board, Friedkin and Weintraub published their own official riposte (Pollock 'R-Rated *Cruising*'). They gave the press a written statement that gave a comprehensive account of their version of events before asserting:

> With a series of innuendos, unattributed comments and official releases...the MPAA have charged that we agreed to make certain changes in *Cruising*...to obtain an 'R' rating, and then did not make the changes. This is false...we did not release a different version (other than to delete scenes) than the one that was submitted for rating. (underlining in original) (Friedkin and Weintraub).

16 Despite all the huffing and puffing on both sides, the relatively minor cuts Heffner demanded were carried out for subsequent releases. Stephen Prince's assessment, that the board's reaction was cursory and that the alterations "were cosmetic rather than substantive" seems accurate (347). While Prince's clear disdain for *Cruising* may have caused him to overstate his case, his point about a causal link

between the censors' belated response to the dissent about the film's 'R' rating, and the reactions from GCC and other leading theatre chains is also well made. The implication is that the censors' later decisions were politically motivated in that they were influenced more by the opinions of the major exhibitors than by the sensitivities of the film's putative audience. On the other side of the argument, Friedkin and Weintraub's combative reaction was probably motivated by the thought that the publicity could only stimulate interest in the film. Given the barely discernible cuts that resulted, the eventual effect of *Cruising*'s censorship row being conducted in public, it might be argued, was simply to bring the absurdity of both parties' posturing into sharp focus.

Researching *Rampage*

17 *Rampage* is probably Friedkin's most obscure film largely because the independent company that financed its making, the Dino de Laurentiis Group, went bankrupt in 1987 as it was about to be released. It was not put on general release until 1992, and then only for a brief time when Miramax released a new version re-edited by Friedkin. The protests that emerged early on in the film's gestation were not played out in the national press and, given the film's subsequent problems, they are now merely a footnote in the production history of a forgotten film. What is particularly interesting about the brouhaha generated is how much it tells us about the manner in which public objections were mobilised in the 1980s. One small newspaper article in a specialist publication managed to trigger a reaction that today would, perhaps, "go viral" in the blink of an eye.

18 Friedkin's first film had been, back in 1962, *The People vs. Paul Crump*, a documentary about a man sentenced to death for a crime Friedkin believed he did not commit, made at a time when he was vehemently opposed to the death penalty. In the meantime, Friedkin's views had modified and he was no longer so sure where he stood on this issue. It was, according to Nat Segaloff, this uncertainty about a subject in which he was interested that prompted him to try to make sense of the complexities of the argument by optioning the rights to William Wood's 1985 novel, *Rampage* (262). The novel is a polemic on the morality of the death penalty and on the American, and specifically

the Californian, legal system, and is based on a notorious real-life case. Friedkin was particularly attracted to the inside knowledge Wood was able to bring to his subject, having served as a Deputy District Attorney (like the book and film's protagonist).

19 The film begins by showing how easy it is for Charles Reece (Alex MacArthur), the murderer, to buy a gun. With Reece armed, the film moves swiftly to the first murder. While the killing is discovered and Deputy District Attorney, Tony Fraser (Michael Biehn) attends the crime scene, Reece immediately goes on to commit his second murder. He is quickly captured by the police and much of the latter part of the film is taken up with his trial. The film also follows the procedural complexities with which Fraser has to grapple if he is to get Reece declared "legally sane", thus making him liable to the death penalty. One hour into the film (which lasts 107 minutes), there is a sudden burst of action that seems to have drifted in from another film when Reece escapes as he is being transported in a police van from court. Once Reece is re-caught, the trial proceeds and the film ends with Reece found guilty and likely to face the death penalty. However, the defence demands further, more advanced brain scans which now identify him as insane and the jury reverses their verdict (unseen). This was different from the 1987 version which ended with a guilty verdict after which Reece commits suicide in his cell. The suicide plot of the first version conforms both to the novel and the real-life events on which it was based [7]. When Friedkin altered the ending in 1992, he left open the possibility that Reece might be released in the future. The ambiguity of this conclusion, that seems to endorse the use of the death penalty, reflects Friedkin's evolving views about the positive value of capital punishment (*Friedkin Connection* 401).

20 Wood's book was based on a real-life model, Richard Trenton Chase, who committed a series of horrific murders and mutilations in late 1977 and early 1978 and committed suicide in prison after his conviction in May 1979 (Daugherty). Friedkin's propensity for a documentarian's approach meant that, as he had done with *Cruising*, he used the source novel in combination with extensive research into the subject including the visits to psychiatric clinics that stimulated the production's troubles (discussed below). In December 1985, Friedkin also sought the advice of a a defence lawyer, Colleen Grace, about the

veracity of the source novel and about the arguments used against the death penalty. In January 1986, she sent Friedkin copies from various cases, observing that the lawyers "don't appear to be using the law so much as appealing to the jury's humanity (not so much his insanity). In one case, they appeal to the doubt in the jury even though they had found him guilty" (Grace). Traces of this research fed into the completed film add to its sense of verisimilitude. Friedkin also read up on Chase extensively and in February, he corresponded with the District Attorney's Office in Sacramento who had prosecuted the case. They supplied him with a detailed list of Chase's horrific acts, many of which Friedkin used for his murderer's habits and activities. These included the mutilation of animals and the drinking of blood, although, thankfully, Friedkin chose to omit some of Chase's most horrific acts such as the sodomisation of one of his victims. As with Reece, Chase was eventually diagnosed as a severe paranoid schizophrenic (Daugherty).

Protests against *Rampage*

21 It was this mining for the small details that led Friedkin once again towards controversy. In a story in the January 1986 edition of *NewsRounds*, the monthly newspaper of the Rush-Presbyterian-St Luke's Medical Center in Chicago, it was reported that Friedkin visited Dr Jim Kavanaugh at the facility as research for a film that would "show the world through the eyes of a killer who is also schizophrenic" ("Friedkin Visits"). The consequence of this small report in a minor publication was a torrent of letters of complaint sent to Friedkin that even outdid *Cruising* as an early intervention: this time it came before even a first draft screenplay had been written. Many of these letters said much the same thing: schizophrenics are no more or less likely to be killers than anyone else and the making of a film where a schizophrenic is a murderer will stigmatize, and confirm prejudices about, the illness. The writers were a combination of health professionals and members of the public, particularly parents of schizophrenic children, and included those who were clearly part of a concerted campaign by the Alliance for the Mentally Ill, whose membership numbered thirty thousand[8]. One letter, from Helen E. Smith of Mount Vernon, concludes: "surely, you can make money some way without hurting so many people." There are even several

letters that amusingly suggest that Friedkin's film could be about a film director-murderer instead. Although hardly likely to have made any wider impact at all, Friedkin did feel the need to respond to the comments in the June/July edition of the same paper:

> In no way is it my intention to equate murder with mental illness… the film deals with the death penalty in California and the arguments for and against it. My purpose in consulting the Issac Ray Center and other professionals in the field is to *accurately* portray the role of forensic psychiatry in a murder case. (Friedkin '*NewsRounds*').

22 There is a certain irony that it was Friedkin's determination to provide an accurate representation of the subject matter by making the visit to specialists in the field that should have caused the protest. Perhaps it was natural for concerned parties to have reacted as they did, especially so in the case of the parents of schizophrenics, but there is no sense from the available evidence that Friedkin's intentions were dishonourable or intended to provoke: in fact, he seems to have been determined to be truthful. The film's sober and procedural depiction of the case may have stemmed from this desire and probably hampered significantly the film's commercial appeal. The hysterical nature of the objections focused on a single quotation where it was presumably assumed that Friedkin would sensationalise the issues. The film does not, however, make the sort of links between murderers and schizophrenia that the letter writers feared it would. Rampage is as obscure a film as any in Friedkin's career and was patently out of step with the marketplace at the time of its release. Yet Friedkin's interest in the minutiae of legal, medical and moral issues leads to it having some resonance with present day issues because it asks questions about American society that still seem relevant; some thirty years later, the question of legal sanity and the death penalty in the United States, as well as gun control, remain controversial and divisive issues.

Conclusion

23 Friedkin was a director who often seemed to relish the "difficult" reputation with which he has been saddled. There is certainly plenty of evidence to indicate Friedkin's serious intent to achieve a high

degree of verisimilitude and to explore both the emotion in, and the mechanics of, contemporary sub-cultures or institutions. On *Cruising*, however, his ideas and decisions were elements that contributed to the film's troublesome release and reputation. As writer-director, if any of the negative criticism was warranted, then a large portion of the responsibility for it can be placed at Friedkin's door. The *provocateur*, who had basked in the controversies surrounding *The Exorcist* that helped propel that film to its exceptional box office performance, was undoubtedly fully aware of the sensitivities that a story like *Cruising* would raise. Friedkin himself was not entirely consistent on this point. In 2007, he was still saying that "the vitriol the film was greeted with still confounds me" (Simon 70). Yet in his autobiography six years later, he is prepared to admit that he knew it could "possibly offend everyone but for me it was just an exotic background for a murder mystery," a distinction that does seem somewhat disingenuous (*Friedkin Connection* 365). What is not in question is that the film's frank portrayal of the leather scene pushed hard against the acceptable boundaries of the time. The 'R' rating originally granted before the censorship row looks now to be somewhat ludicrous in the context of the time. In fact, given how the AIDS epidemic would eviscerate New York's leather scene a few years later, *Cruising*'s portrayal of this milieu can be seen as a historical artefact because it depicts a vanished sub-culture. The sexual freedom that the scene celebrated tragically also proved to be its undoing. As Grady Hendrix observed, "a large slice of the men you see in the club are no longer with us" (Bailey 4).

By the time Friedkin made *Rampage* in 1987, the American film industry had gravitated further towards populist high concept filmmaking, leaving the New Hollywood auteurs with far fewer opportunities to make the type of personal cinema that had characterised their earlier careers. As many of the maverick filmmakers who had emerged out of the Renaissance period also discovered, if Friedkin wanted to remain in gainful employment, there was a simple necessity to become more willing to co-operate with those able and willing to finance his films, and to avoid his earlier tendency to consciously play the role of *provocateur*. His heart attack in March 1981 may also have been a factor in nudging him towards a less confrontational outlook. Segaloff argues that after the coronary, "his films very clearly

reflect an awareness, barely acknowledged consciously, of the frailty of human life" (212). *Rampage* certainly falls into this category and the furor over its potential depiction of schizophrenia as a trigger for murderous behaviour was an issue that Friedkin appears to have taken seriously, while still noting that the complaints were somewhat tenuous, given that Friedkin had yet to write even a first draft. Both *Cruising* and *Rampage* were magnets for the sort of trouble that shows how difficult it was, and still is, for filmmakers to approach certain types of serious subject-matter in a manner that they believe is truthful. Even if their intentions are both honest and honourable, they must still take account of the sensitivities of a wide constituency of interested parties.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE

Jason Bailey, "Making Sense of *Cruising*." *Village Voice*, 21 Mar. 2018, pp. 1-5.

Arthur Bell, "Another Murder at the Anvil." *Village Voice*, 22 Jan. 1979. William Friedkin Papers (WFP hereafter), Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Pictures and Sciences, Los Angeles. Item f. 168.

Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls.* Bloomsbury, 1998.

Andrew Britton, "Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment (1986)." *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton.* Edited by Barry Keith Grant, Wayne State University, 2009, pp. 97-154.

Paul Burston, "So Good It Hurts." *Sight and Sound*, vol. 8, No. 11, 1998, p. 24.

Thomas Clagett, *William Friedkin: Films of Aberration, Obsession and Reality.* Silman-James Press, 2003.

John Daugherty, (Office of the District Attorney, Sacramento). "Letter to Kathy Lambert" (Rampage Productions), 4 Feb. 1986, including materials about "People vs. Richard Trenton Chase". WFP: f. 653.

Fred Ferretti, "Filming of *Cruising* Goes More Calmly." *New York Times*, 7 Aug. 1979, p. C7.

Stefan Fitterman, "Letter to Friedkin." 20 Sept 1979. WFP: f. 113.

William Friedkin, "Letter to Nancy Littlefield, Mayor of New York's Office of Motion Pictures and Television." 9 Oct. 1979. WFP: f. 113.

William Friedkin, "Letter to Mayor Ed Koch." 19 Oct. 1979. WFP: f. 113.

William Friedkin, "Letter to George Grella." University of Rochester, 17 Jun. 1980. WFP: f. 113.

William Friedkin, *Cruising* Script, 14 Feb. 1980.' WFP: f. 103.

William Friedkin, A Statement from William Friedkin." *NewsRounds*,

June/July 1986, p. 5.

William Friedkin, *The Friedkin Connection.* Harper Perennial, 2013.

William Friedkin and Jerry Weintraub, "Statement of William Friedkin and Jerry Weintraub Relative to *Cruising* and its 'R' Rating." 17 Jun 1980. WFP: f. 167.

"Friedkin Visits Issac Ray Center." *NewsRounds*, Jan. 1986, p. 16. WFP: f: 623.

Coleen Grace, "Letter to Friedkin." 15 Jan. 1986. WFP: f. 656.

George Grella, "*Cruising*: Artful, Shocking." *Rochester-City Newspaper*, unknown date. WFP: f. 113.

George Grella, "Letter to Friedkin." 11 Apr. 1980. WFP: f. 113.

Larry Gross, "Whatever Happened to William Friedkin?" *Sight and Sound*, vol. 5, No. 12, Dec. 1995, pp. 14-15.

Arjan Harmetz, "How *Cruising* Received Its "R" Rating." *New York Times*, 16 Feb. 1980, p. 12.

Jim Jensen, "Interview with Friedkin." Transcript of broadcast excerpt, WCBS-TV, 25 Jul. 1979, 11.30 pm. WFP: f. 166.

Max Karnick, "Letter to Friedkin." 19 Sep. 1979. WFP: f.113.

Mark Kermode, "Cruise Control." *Sight and Sound*, vol. 8, No. 11, Nov. 1998, pp. 22-24.

Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction.* I.B. Tauris, 2002.

Bill Krohn, "Friedkin Out." *Rouge*, No. 3, 2004, pp. 1-12. rouge.com.au/3/friedkin.html

Les Ledbetter, "1000 in "Village" Renew Protest Against Movie on Homosexuals." *New York Times*, 26 Jul. 1979, p. B2.

Gerald Petievich,*To Live and Die in L.A.* Pocket Books, 1984.

Pollock, Dale, 'Friedkin Film *Cruising* into a Storm of Protest.' *Los Angeles Times*, 4 Feb. 1980, p. 61.

Pollock, Dale, "R- Rated *Cruising*: The MPAA Seal of Disapproval." *Los Angeles Times Calendar*, 4 May 1980, pp. 1, 6-7.

Pollock, Dale, "*Cruising*: The Battle Continues." *Los Angeles Times*, 27 Jun. 1980, part VI, p. 9.

Frank Prete, "Letter to Friedkin." 3 Mar. 1980. WFP: f. 113.

Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989.* University of California Press, 2000.

Nat Segaloff, *Hurricane Billy: The Stormy Life and Films of William Friedkin.* William Morrow, 1990.

Roseanne Scamardella, "Transcript of broadcast excerpt." WABC-TV, 25 Jul. 1979, 11.35pm. WFP: f. 166.

Tom Shone, *Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Summer.* Simon and Schuster, 2004.

Alex Simon, "*Cruising* with Billy." *Venice*, Sept. 2007, pp. 69-71.

Helen E. Smith, "Letter to Friedkin." 14 May 1986. WFP: f. 613.

John Van Dorn and Barry Gra, "Transcript of broadcast excerpt." WMCA, 25 Jul. 1979, 6.27 pm. WFP: f. 166.

Keith Williams, "Letter to Friedkin." 14 Aug. 1979. WFP: f.113.

Linda Ruth Williams, "No Sex Please, We're American." *Sight and Sound*, vol. 14, No. 1, Jan. 2004, pp. 18-20.

Robin Wood, "The Incoherent Text: Narrative in the '70s." *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan.* Columbia University Press, 2nd ed. 2003, pp. 41-62.

William Wood, *Rampage*. Star Books, 1985.

Justin Wyatt, *High Concept Movies and Marketing in Hollywood.* University of Texas Press, 1994.

Bud Yorkin, "Memo to Bob Shapiro (Warners) re. *Deal of the Century*." 25 Aug. 1982. WFP: f. 213.

NOTES

1 Examples include King 49-84; Britton; Shone; Wyatt.

2 See for example Bailey, Burston, Kermode, Krohn and Simon. There has also been a recent (2019) Blu-ray release.

3 Excerpts from television and radio reports are transcribed in Friedkin's papers: see Jensen, Scamardella and Van Dorn. Examples of newspaper articles include Ledbetter, Ferretti, Pollock ("Friedkin Film *Cruising* into a Storm of Protest").

4 The disclaimer has long since been removed.

5 The letter writer seems to be conflating 'effluence' and 'refuse'.

6 For example, Harmetz, "R-Rated *Cruising*"; Pollock, "*Cruising*: The Battle Continues".

7 As far as I can tell, the 1987 version has not been available in any format since its initial release.

8 Letters in files labelled "Hate Mail 1986" in Friedkin's papers, items f.612 and f.613. The co-ordinated nature of the campaign is obvious because many of the letters are virtually identical.

RÉSUMÉS

English

The writers of American film history tend to consider the 1980s in terms of blockbusters and right-wing ideology. Yet in this decade, as Stephen Prince has observed, 'Hollywood itself was attacked for films that were unaccept-

ably lewd, bigoted or sacrilegious'. One of the most infamous examples is 1980's *Cruising*, William Friedkin's film about an undercover policeman hunting a serial killer in New York's gay leather scene. Protests during location filming were accompanied by highly partial coverage in local and national newspapers, while, after its release, *Cruising* managed to generate yet more controversy when a spat between the filmmakers and the censors was played out in the national press. Seven years later, Friedkin's ability to attract 'trouble' reared its head again when protests, this time before a screenplay had even been written, were made against *Rampage*'s purported portrayal of a schizophrenic murderer (based on a real case). A concerted letter campaign was the result of one brief article about the writer-director's research which appeared to imply that the film would make a disturbing correlation between schizophrenia and homicidal tendencies. Given Friedkin's seemingly unerring ability to generate inflammatory headlines (also evident, for example, when he was making *The Exorcist*), and making extensive use of Friedkin's papers, this article considers the extent of his intentionality in his approach to sensitive and controversial subject matter. Was he being deliberately provocative or was he simply approaching serious subjects with a documentary-style precision? These two instances of a filmmaker managing to attract 'trouble' opens up a discussion of the effect on filmmaking, and on reception, of such difficult production contexts. Although it has since been subject to some critical rehabilitation, the reputation of *Cruising* was set in stone by the surrounding brouhaha while *Rampage*, a largely unknown work, still managed to generate protests although the concerns of the complainants were quickly forgotten when the film rapidly disappeared from sight. In this article, the employment of archival material allows for a more nuanced perspective on how media accounts can sometimes distort our understanding, in retrospect, of contemporaneous attitudes.

Français

De manière générale le cinéma des années 1980 est souvent réduit aux *blockbusters* et aux films conservateurs. Pourtant, la décennie fut également marquée par un certain nombre de films qui ont heurté la sensibilité du public. Cette étude se concentrera sur deux d'entre eux, *Cruising* (1980) et *Rampage* (1987), tous les deux du réalisateur de *l'Exorciste*, William Friedkin. Si les deux films dépeignent les communautés marginalisées — la communauté homosexuelle « cuir » pour l'un et l'univers de la schizophrénie pour l'autre — les controverses ont troublé le public de façon très différente.

INDEX

Mots-clés

années 1980, controverses, provocation

Keywords
1980s, controversy, provocation

AUTEUR

Chris Horn
Dr Chris Horn is an independent scholar and tutor in film studies at the University of Leicester. He recently published his first monograph, *The Lost Decade: Altman, Coppola, Friedkin and the Hollywood Renaissance Auteur in the 1980s* (Bloomsbury, 2023). The book offers an alternative perspective on 1980s American film history through a focus on the fortunes and films of a group of filmmakers whose decade is conventionally perceived to be one of collective creative and commercial decline.