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Interior. Leather Bar.

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Interior. Leather Bar.

Abstract

This is a film review of *Interior. Leather Bar.* (2013) directed by Travis Mathews and James Franco.

Keywords

Homosexuality, Taboo, Cruising

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Interior. Leather Bar

Directed by Travis Mathews and James Franco

(New Frontier Film)

Actor James Franco explains that the driving force behind the film he co-directed with Travis Mathews to be a book he read while a graduate student at Yale, Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal*. The concern is that while gays have become accepted in broad swaths of American society today, it has come at the cost of normalizing and homogenizing the gay experience – they're just like straights, only gayer! But at its heart, "gay culture" is "queer culture," different, dissenting, challenging of the norms of American life, especially its sex life.

Franco, who is straight, chooses to reclaim a piece of queer cinema, forty minutes of William Friedkin's 1980 film *Cruising*, which starred Al Pacino as a cop who must go undercover in New York's gay bars to solve a string of murders. A scene set in a leather bar and some others were cut to appease the ratings board of the Motion Picture Association of America. Franco and Mathews recruit actors, gay and straight, to "reimagine" the lost footage.



While the film is built around the explicit scenes that result, they represent a surprisingly small part of it. Most of *Interior. Leather Bar.* is framed as a discussion between Franco and his lead, Val Lauren, about the artistic value of the enterprise itself. Lauren, the Al Pacino stand in, is straight and very uncomfortable with the project, though he commits himself to it out of loyalty to Franco, his friend of fifteen years. In this way he is the proxy not only for Pacino's character (and perhaps Pacino himself), but the "normal," expectable mainstream audiences of both the original film and this one. Lauren voices concerns that depicting this kind of sexuality does not have a place in theatres, at least outside of porn houses. Franco gives a full-throated defense of not only artistic freedom but also the role of the artist in challenging society's taboos. Taboo represents the lines where a culture marks its boundaries between who is in and who is out, right and wrong, "normal" and not, typically reflecting predominant religious mores. Franco will have none of that; he does not want to feel one kind of expression of love, or anything else is right just because it is depicted that way in every movie, TV show, and commercial. He asserts that as uncomfortable as this kind of sexuality makes most people, his film aims to depict it as beautiful, in contrast to the tone of *Cruising*, which represented Pacino's entry into the gay world as a descent into evil. And indeed, most of the cast interviewed, gay or straight, seem genuinely excited to be on the project, whether as a chance to work with Franco, to challenge themselves artistically, to do

something wild, or even to participate in an S&M scene as a committed gay couple.

Lauren is either a perfect choice to lead this film, or an ironic one – or in fact playing another role, scripted from the start. Several scenes suggest to the audience that his discomfort is part of the narrative Franco wishes to tell, with what looks to be observed footage of the actor or real debate over the film ended when Mathews calls “Cut!” The film leaves its audience to wonder which part of the movie about the movie footage that does not exist is really real, and how much is Franco’s attempt to confront us with our own fascination about what lies on the other side of taboo.

— Dereck Daschke