Secret and Divine Signs: A Cinematic Ode to the Art of Cruising

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SECRET AND DIVINE SIGNS:
A CINEMATIC ODE TO THE ART OF CRUISING

BY

TERRENCE HUNT

A Master’s Capstone Project report submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Arts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,
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Secret and Divine Signs:  
A Cinematic Ode to the Art of Cruising  
by Terrence Hunt

This capstone project and manuscript have been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Arts in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

_Cruising_ is a practice that connects people looking for casual sex through a series of gestures, behaviors and codes that signal one’s sexual orientation and interest. These cruising behaviors and codes are changing because of advances in technology, because of cruising’s sudden exposure to the wider community through media, and evolving cultural values that no longer demand gay sex be kept secret. Cruising is in the public consciousness like never before. This project, a short film entitled _Secret and Divine Signs: A Cinematic Ode to the Art of Cruising_, investigates, records and pays homage to the cultural practices of cruising, in order to explore its capacity to offer connection, and the radical potentiality of outsider and divergent communities.

Cruising activity is often misunderstood and feared by the mainstream population as a deviant and inherently dangerous practice. Cruising is equated with sexual assault, or at least framed as an assault to family values. This film aims to reframe perceptions of cruising, calling for acceptance and celebration of the practice. Cruising cultures may offer an experience of connection and sensual exploration, an affirmation of natural human sexuality, and a catalyst for a shift from the prurient values of the current age. The social value of cruising, the assessment of public space for erotic potential should be considered without deference to puritanical cultural values.

_Secret and Divine Signs: A Cinematic Ode to the Art of Cruising_ is an experimental documentary art film that attempts to record past and present cruising culture using audio interviews, filmed footage of New York City’s cruising sites, archival footage, appropriated imagery from Hollywood films, vintage pornography, graphic text, and an original music soundtrack. The film aspires to be an artistic and philosophical inquiry into the culture and practice
of cruising. The film supports the radical prospect of queer culture building by working against the heteronormalization of society. Encouraging the acceptance of the cruising’s alternative intimacies might expand possibilities for inclusion of people who struggle with culturally constructed constraints. At the very least, the culture of cruising and the histories of its sites are worthy of documentation in order to examine society’s current biases and reveal future potentialities. This short film celebrates cruising’s past, looks to its future and hopes to encourage a less repressive, diverse and affirming society.
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Among the men and women, the multitude,
I perceive one picking me out by secret and divine signs,
Acknowledging none else—
not parent, wife, husband, brother, child, any nearer than I am;
Some are baffled— but that one is not— that one knows me.

– Walt Whitman, ‘Leaves of Grass’

Conceptualization

‘Cruising’ is an activity performed mostly by men seeking a casual sex partner. It consists of several elements: an exchange of gazes; a display of codes that signal desire; and an offer. Cruising often occurs in public places, but because it consists of subtle gestures and codes, it is not often obvious to everyone, and can easily be interpreted, incorrectly, to mean something altogether innocuous, much like the word itself.

Before the mid-1990s and the dawn of the Internet, gay and bisexual men looking to ‘hook up’ casually could try looking for sex partners either in gay bars or out of doors. The emergence of cruising sites simplified the search for sex partners, since these spaces were (unofficially) designated for sex rather than for socializing. This effectively separated the wheat from the chaff, drawing like-minded sex-seekers with clear intentions together. At that time, cruising was an activity that was conducted in public: mostly on the street, or in public parks and bathrooms. One of the problems faced by men looking for sex partners in a public place was drawing the wrong kind of attention. Cruising sites are almost always shared spaces. Parks and bathrooms where cruising occurs are also frequented by patrons who are ignorant of, or are uninterested in, the
sexual encounters that may occur there. More problematic still, when confronted with men overtly looking for sex, uninterested patrons can take offense or feel threatened by the activity, inciting them to react with aggression or violence, or prompting them to report the activity to the authorities.

Avoiding this danger necessitated the development of semiotic communication amongst men looking for sex partners in public places, for reasons of discretion and of safety. ‘Cruising,’ as this semiotic communication came to be known, employed strategies to disguise one’s sexual orientation from outsiders, to avoid causing offence, and to maintain privacy for the ‘cruisers,’ — those on the hunt in public for a casual sex partner.

A series of cultural, political and technological shifts over the last quarter century have led to profound changes in the way men who have sex with men find their sex partners. Learning the lore of cruising—the behaviors which include complex semiotics and codes that signal one’s sexual orientation and desires—has traditionally been a rite of passage for young gay men. In the age of the Internet, these behaviors, semiotics, and codes are changing profoundly. Developments in digital technology, and in particular GPS-enabled smart phone apps, have extended the realm of cruising from the physical world to the virtual. The intricate behavioral etiquette of cruising in the past has been replaced with a more blunt, but perhaps just as impenetrable, idiomatic banter. Some older cruisers, including a number of the interview subjects for this project, sense that the culture that facilitated sex in public places is disappearing. In fact, the prevailing narrative seems to suggest that the proliferation of apps for sex has led to the death of cruising in public. Back rooms in New York City are all but gone, and many gay bars in smaller-cities are closing. The old-school gay bar appears to have become less relevant for younger gays, since their social groups now readily include people of all genders and sexualities, and since sex can be found through an app.
Outdoor cruising sites are reportedly becoming less frequented and consequently some of cruising’s secret codes are vanishing.

This film, *Secret and Divine Signs: A Cinematic Ode to the Art of Cruising*, is a reaction to that prognostication, and an attempt to acknowledge and record these traditions, lest they disappear completely. The film seeks to pay homage to cruising culture’s creation and maintenance of queer space and gay folklore. It is a celebration of the creation and maintenance of queer space and gay folklore. And it is also, quite simply, an homage to cruising itself.

Exploring the idea of E.W. Delph’s ‘erotic oases,’ the film examines the past and present cultures of cruising and questions whether these cultures are lost or altered when cruising for sex moves online and indoors. The film attempts to illustrate the ‘strange balletic quality’ of gay pick-ups described by Guy Hocquenghem and investigates whether a cyberspace equivalent exists. It asks if there is a future for the physical, real-world practice of cruising—or indeed any kind of deviance from the sexual mainstream—despite the continued religious, political and social conservatism in a society whose mores seem bounded by social, religious and political conservatism.

As previously mentioned, cruising pre-Internet mostly took place out of doors, but it also occurred inside. Certain movie theaters—semi-public spaces offering dimly lit, cavernous rooms with low-slung seats in close proximity, corralled by rows and aisles—made the perfect rendezvous spots for men looking to partner up. And the cruising was not confined just to the seats beneath the screen. It happened on the screen as well. Cruising has appeared in several films since the early 1970s, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. William Friedkin’s controversial *Cruising* (1980) depicted a gay underground culture and implicated it with murder. Conversely,

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1 Delph, *The Silent Community*. p60
2 Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*. p131
contemporaneous European representations like *Johan* (1975) and *Taxi Zum Klo* (1981) revealed the more nuanced perspective of a parallel queer culture existing alongside, and invisible to the dominant social order, yet challenging it. *Secret and Divine Signs* collects and creatively re-represents the filmic history of cruising. By re-presenting filmic cruising, its real-world equivalent can be scrutinized.

Cruising and cinema are connected in more ways than one. Hollywood films have assiduously abetted scopophilia, and encouraged the objectifying gaze by presenting the look of the camera without awkward consequences for the spectator, allowing the camera to ogle unapologetically at its subjects. In real life, there would be awkward consequences for the spectator behaving this way. A particular kind of looking occurs from spectator to screen, from camera to subject, and many times within the diegetic space of the film. The subtle gazing of an on-screen desiring couple, exchanging short glances curtailed by modesty and apprehension, has often been rendered through the mechanics of camera and editing. Queer film scholar Gary Needham, investigating a particular queer spectatorship of the 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain*, argues that cinematic conventions, and particularly the classical Hollywood style of continuity editing of (shot/reverse shot), brings the spectator into the world of the film and into a desiring association with the protagonists. “Cruising in this instance is about editing as much as it is about looking and the particularities of shot/reverse shot work to place us into the exchange in the closest way possible to how an actual cruise is often described or experienced.”

For all these reasons—that movie theaters have functioned as cruising venues; that film spectatorship echoes the desiring gaze; that classical editing mirrors the exchange of glances of cruising men—film seemed like the appropriate medium for creatively exploring cruising culture. A film screened publicly might also reach more people than might an unpublished essay, especially the people to whom it could be

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3 Needham, “Cruising as Another Way of Looking?” p54
most meaningful: queer, gay and bisexual men of different generations.

Some decades ago, the movie theaters and sidewalks of Forty Second Street in New York City were a hub for cruising, creating an anomalous zone of queer sanctuary that was avoided by mainstream society. Cultural geographers had not long begun to describe and delineate the idea of queer space, and to identify the public spaces that possess erotic potential when, at least in New York City, conservative initiatives were introduced to eradicate them. In New York City, it was Mayor Giuliani who led the efforts at the hetero-normalization and Disneyfication of the city’s zones of deviance—most famously the ‘cleaning up’ of Forty Second Street and Times Square. This, plus the dampening effect of the AIDS crisis, and the advent of the Internet and its subsequent opportunities for online cruising, all took a toll on the city’s queer-friendly zones. While contemplating and celebrating the practices of cruising, *Secret and Divine Signs* investigates the claim that cruising culture, and in particular, the cruising culture of New York City, is disappearing. The eradication of sites of public sex may be the goal of the establishment, but for the sake of an open, diverse, and robust community, this eradication should be questioned. In the film, cruisers recount the current state of cruising activity, and what benefits cruising culture offers some members of the community. It is arguable that queer-friendly zones of the city are being expunged by regulation and gentrification, but, despite the powerful socioeconomic and hegemonic market pressures, cruising sites and erotic oases still exist. Could the general populace be encouraged to appreciate them as they are? Could the still extant queer- and sex-friendly locations be accepted for their alternative use as erotic oases? Is it possible that the general populace might one day lose their disgust of them, and forgo their compulsion to sanitize them—a recurring response to sexual progressiveness in New York City since the time of Mayor Giuliani?

Attitudes change over time; the marriage equality approval figures over the last twenty years

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4 Doan and Higgins, “The Demise of Queer Space?” p2
clearly demonstrate this. If popular culture can change attitudes, then a short film encouraging the rethinking of conservative attitudes to sexual diversity is most certainly worthwhile.

*Secret and Divine Signs* visually presents select New York City cruising locations, juxtaposing backdrop images of chaste natural beauty with the salacious narration of interviewees’ cruising stories, and instruction on how to go about it. The juxtaposition highlights the irony—or perhaps the harmony—of these two worlds colliding. Interviewees share their knowledge, their expertise, their past experiences and their expectations for the future. The film makes a pitch for the maintenance of the erotic oases still extant. But even if sites of queer erotic potential cannot be preserved, and are legislated out of existence, or swallowed up by the property industry; and if the street culture of cruising becomes relegated to a cyberspace facsimile, then this relict practice deserves chronicling. Any culture in flux or in danger of disappearing ought to be recorded. Film, a medium that utilizes image and sound in the dimension of time, seems like the best avenue in which to pay homage to an act that relies so heavily on vision and hearing in its consummation.

While the film acknowledges the street cruising cultures that enabled gay men to connect and fraternize, it challenges the nostalgia reflex by celebrating contemporary cruising in its new and varied forms. Some interviewees attest that the street cruising of the pre-AIDS era may have waned, but has not disappeared. In addition to street cruising, contemporary queers of different races, classes and ages have re-established modes of sexual connection utilizing new technologies. The film considers the relevance and legitimacy of these new technologies—are they helping the creation of community or hindering it? Do they connect across divides of race, class and age, or do they encourage our commodification and objectification of each other? This short film will not give an outright answer to these questions; it simply raises them. It gives voice to cruisers of different races, classes, and ages, in order to enumerate the varied techniques and technologies of
their choosing, many of which happen to be the old-fashioned methods of cruising on the street.

The Secret and Divine Signs project was partly inspired by a text written by queer theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner. ‘Sex in Public,’<sup>5</sup> published in 1998 in the journal Critical Inquiry, argued for the idea of queer ‘counterpublics’ to counteract the heteronormalization of society. Berlant and Warner were not only referring to sex acts in public space. They were also voicing concerns that a whole raft of socially proscribed behaviors deemed normal or acceptable by the mainstream—are perpetuated as the dominant paradigm in public space. Cruising is a practical and physical manifestation of Berlant and Warner’s conceptual ideas about the countering of proscribed acceptable behavior. Evidently, the outer bounds of acceptability are breached by the act of cruising when the reactions of law enforcement and the media are examined: police returning again and again to cruising sites to conduct sting and entrapment operations; and sensational, tabloid-style reporting on the ensuing arrests. My choice to investigate and celebrate this criminalized practice in film was an attempt to subvert these reactions, to subvert the perpetuation of proscribed behavior, and to contribute to the exploration of diversity in sexuality.

At present, same-sex couples gain acceptance from the traditional social order by adapting and imitating heteronormative practice. It is possible to imagine a time when same-sex couples—when queer people in general—need not imitate heteronormative sexual practices to gain acceptance; they may engage in non-traditional sexual practices without risk of vilification. One of the ways in which this might occur is through the destigmatization of non-traditional sexual practices, through positive portrayals in the media. The destigmatization of cruising may thus help banish the notion that queer people must behave like straight people in order to be accepted by heteronormative society.

Berlant and Warner, in their arguments for queer counterpublics, include promiscuity and

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<sup>5</sup> Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public.”
non-vanilla heterosexual contact. It was my hope that Secret and Divine Signs could include contributions from a wide range of subjects of various genders and orientations. Ascribing to a theory of the social construction of gender, cruising activity could theoretically be open to all. Subjects of various genders, sexual orientations, and kinks could be meeting up in a city’s erotic oases, and could therefore be contributing to this alternate culture. The role of people of color, trans, and even straight-identifying folk in expanding cruising from its mis-understanding as a primarily gay male activity should also be considered.

Although the heterosexually-inclined smartphone app Tinder may be shaking up the straight cruising scene online, real life cruising encounters consisting of anything other than male-to-male sex proved difficult to corroborate in my research. The practice of cruising, as it is popularly understood, seems primarily limited to gays, male bisexuals, and other men who have sex with men. Sociologist Denise Bullock has written about lesbian cruising, but had to expand the definition of cruising to do so. Obviously, women express their attraction to one another, but these modes of expression differ markedly from what we know as cruising, because they so rarely lead to public sex. It would certainly be worth examining these differences. While seeking alternative accounts to traditional gay men’s cruising I heard anecdotally of an attempt to start a lesbian cruising scene in a public park in London, England, which sadly wasn’t successful over the long term. One female interviewee told me of a butch female friend who successfully cruised for men at the ‘Meat Rack’ on Fire Island (between The Pines and Cherry Grove communities), but went on to concede that cruising really isn’t part of lesbian culture. Another wrote to me:

“I’ve thought a lot about cruising, and why lesbians don’t do it—it’s an experience women just don’t seem to have. Women may check each other out at a bar and go home together, but they don’t have immediate public sex—there was a brief time in the ’90s when lesbians set up back rooms in bars, and we all flocked to them as a matter of principle, but they just didn’t last. And as far as I could tell, most of the people having sex in them

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6 Denise Bullock, “Lesbian Cruising.”
were already couples—they hadn’t just met in the bar. There was also the brief heyday of Plato’s Retreat in the ’80s, which I suppose you could say was straight cruising in a limited and non-public space. But for someone like me who doesn’t believe in essentialist gendered sexual behaviors, it’s puzzling that there’s this one specific activity that’s really limited to gay men.”

In theory, a confluence of gender and cultural factors operate to support a cruising ecosystem; in practice, cruising is primarily an activity that is limited to men who have sex with men. Secret and Divine Signs concentrates on the experience of gay men only because my search for trans or lesbian subjects who cruise was unsuccessful. This should probably be viewed as a shortcoming of the project research; without exhaustive inquiry, it would be unwise to conclude that the cruising experience is limited to cis-male practitioners. The intention of the work was to argue for the affirmation of all varieties of queer counterpublics, to encourage the establishment and maintenance of all kinds of erotic oases, to inform an audience of the changing culture of cruising in New York City, and to challenge the sexual norms of the dominant social order by pointing out some viable alternatives.

Though there was a lack of gender diversity in the results of my investigation, there was at least some diversity when it came to identities of race, class, and economic status. One of the inspiring aspects of cruising culture is its ability to bridge these divides and connect people across their differences—if only briefly.

Another area of concern while creating Secret and Divine Signs was the ethics of revealing publicly the geographic locations of certain cruising sites. In the past, cruising sites have generally been kept semi-secret for reasons of safety. It is, of course, in the interest of cruisers to avoid law enforcement, perpetrators of assault who might target gays, and naïve / non-sexual users of public spaces who may be offended by what they encounter. In this age of Internet ubiquity, however, no

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7 Professor Sally O’Driscoll, English Department, Fairfield University, Private correspondence.
cruising site is beyond a simple Google search. Ironically, the golden age of cruising seems to have coincided with a time of reticence about divergent sex of any kind. The fact that polite company dare not speak its name allowed cruising practices to flourish under the radar. Nowadays, cruising as a practice is better-known, but this fact has contributed to its downturn. Cruising is under threat from a scandalized population who now know perfectly well what is really going on when they see it, and who have no qualms about reporting behavior of which they don’t approve. The current diminished state of cruising and the decline in the number of erotic oases still in existence is partly a result of this. The plethora of news stories shaming unlucky cruisers caught in the act provides ample evidence. At the beginning of Secret and Divine Signs the newsreaders’ reports—little more than homophobic scaremongering—reveal that cruising is in the consciousness of the general public like never before. To combat this hysteria, it is necessary to mount a defense and offer a positive narrative of cruising. This film is part of that defense, though it may or may not reach those whom it seeks to convince; the audience of Secret and Divine Signs will most likely be the self-selecting, interested parties favorably disposed to the message. However the arguments play out in public, an investigation into cruising could offer a significant contribution to the understanding of a sexual subculture that is not widely studied. The practice of cruising may or may not contribute to the struggle for a progressive, diverse and open-minded utopia. In any case, cruising has lasted in New York City since the days of Walt Whitman’s wanderings in the urban landscape, where he first chanced upon a stranger’s ‘secret and divine signs,’ and it is bound to continue in the future.
The Film

*Secret and Divine Signs: A Cinematic Ode to the Art of Cruising* combines audio interviews, filmed footage of New York City’s iconic cruising grounds, archival footage, appropriated imagery from Hollywood films, vintage pornography, graphic text, and an original music soundtrack. These constituents together form a work of pastiche, collage, and appropriation. The film explores the current state of cruising while analyzing its anarchic and diverse modes. It aims to interrogate the meaning of the activity, to determine its value to its practitioners, and to speculate on cruising’s future in a censorious world.

The film begins with a montage of network news reports about police raids on cruising sites across the country. The sensational reporting confirms the prudish and parochial societal attitudes to cruising, but lays bare the contradiction of the mainstream’s preoccupation with prurient activities. Sex stories rate. The news stories that appear in the introduction to *Secret and Divine Signs* have been treated with video effects mimicking poor reception, or inferior quality receivers, in an effort to mirror the crudeness and cheapness of the journalism, and to visually distance their message of mortification from the material that follows.

The film switches gears to a suite of images of cruising, gathered from the 1975 French film *Johan*, a *sui generis* work by Philippe Vallois that recreates episodes of the filmmaker’s life with guerrilla-tactic, documentary-style filming in public spaces in Paris, France. Vallois filmed extraordinary scenes for *Johan* consisting of acted cruising sequences interpolated with genuine, candid street cruising. Over these shots, the film’s opening title appears in a large, bold font, and this aesthetic continues as a motif throughout the film, with chapter titles delineating individual
subject segments. The bold titles are an aesthetic attempt to analogize the audacity of the act of cruising and the courage of the interview subjects.

![Figure 1 Opening Titles](image)

The film starts in earnest with some graphic text that delivers a poetic definition of the act of cruising: *looking back at looking*. This epigraph is not only a definition of cruising, but also expresses one aspect of this project: an investigation into the role of the eyes—the gaze—as well other parts of the body and its maneuvers, integral to the cruising practice. Interviewees speak frankly and specifically about how one cruises, and how it requires a bold engagement with others, the kind of engagement that stands in direct opposition to the way we usually move amongst urban multitudes: by disconnecting from people as individual subjects. English Literature scholar Mark W. Turner writes, “The urban encounter with the other is a fraught exchange, precisely because it breaks the rules of the city, forcing connection, rather than reinforcing separation.”8 This connection is precisely what makes the practice of cruising interesting, useful for building community, and instrumental in bridging divides that the conventional urban social order imposes.

8 Turner, *Backward Glances*. p95
The film proceeds in a pattern of alternating sequences, shifting between calculatedly bucolic and picturesque footage of nature—or at least as close to nature as one can get in a New York City park—and montages of cruising scenes, culled from pornographic and mainstream films. The nature sequences, filmed at sites historically known for cruising activity, accompany the interviewees’ comments on their experience of and attitudes towards cruising. Punctuating the exploratory, analytic commentary are montages of cruising activity accompanied by fast-paced, percussive music. The montages are collated to maximize the gaudy color and their visceral sensuality, and include sequences that add a dash of humor.

One of the challenges of the Secret and Divine Signs project was building a narrative structure from the several hours of audio interviews that would form the foundation of the film. Though I approached the interviews with set questions, each subject’s experiences and circumstances led each conversation in a refreshingly different direction. The generosity and spontaneity of the interviewees produced several hours of personal testimony, which necessitated a process of sifting through the tape to distinguish themes. Eventually I was able to arrange responses into a suite of topics, summarized in the table below.
One part of the rationale for making *Secret and Divine Signs* was to explore the relationship between the geography and the sociology of cruising. The film links the natural world to the ‘unnatural’ acts of which those spaces give sanctuary. The picturesque sequences of New York’s parks were filmed to flaunt their natural beauty, but also to obliquely hint at the manifold uses of these public spaces. In the film, mysterious pathways head toward dense thickets. Snow is trodden down over trails to nowhere. Cognizant audiences may note the familiar signs, but if not, the locations are named in titles (seen below in Figure 3). The names of the locations may spur
recognition in other viewers, since they are infamous, and many have appeared in books, in films, or in shared personal stories.

The overlaid narrations of cruisers past and present educate those unfamiliar with the non-standard practices that take place here. *Secret and Divine Signs* bears witness to the most famous sites of cruising in New York City: The Ramble, The Vale of Cashmere of Prospect Park, Fort Tryon Park and Fort Tilden’s sand dunes; all are depicted. In coupling the footage with the narration, the film attempts a justification of cruising as one of many legitimate uses of public parks. Why should public space be reserved for exclusively chaste activities? The park sequences of the film weave together the beauty of the locations with an unapologetic defense for the maintenance of existent erotic oases.

*Figure 3 Title for The Ramble ‘How it’s Done’ Interview section.*
Secret and Divine Signs gives voice to New York City cruisers of different races, classes and generations. The film employs audio interviews with older cruisers who reflect on the culture of cruising in the past, and with younger cruisers who defend the idiosyncrasies of cruising today, including online cruising. Participants talk about the techniques and ethics of cruising, how they themselves have experienced the different modes of the practice in different locations, and its significance to them and to the wider culture. They express different opinions; some talk about cruising having changed tremendously over the years and others talk about how it has essentially stayed the same.

The film is structured in six acts: What is Cruising?; How it’s Done; Diversity; AIDS and its Impact on Cruising; Apps and their Impact; and finally, the way the interviewees see the Future of Cruising. Throughout the narration can be found threads of nostalgia for past modes and bygone sites of cruising, including, for some, the presumption that cruising on the street is dead or dying. Common to many is an opinion that cruising via apps and websites causes a commodification of sex partners (a major complaint that can also be encountered amongst users of mainstream heterosexual dating apps as well). This problematizing narrative builds dramatic tension when it presents the dispiriting argument that the classic cruising of the past is over. In fact, anecdotal investigation suggests that cruising in public continues, at least in New York City, and the film concludes on a qualified positive note. Conservative audiences may disagree with the message of sex-positivity and the defense and encouragement of erotic space, but the film assumes a positive outlook for its assumed audience.

The main nature sequences of Secret and Divine Signs, outlined above, are broken up by ‘film collages’ of appropriated footage of cruising: interludes consisting of fast-paced montages of
acted cruising from pornography, Hollywood, and foreign films. An example title from one of these sections is presented in Figure 5 below. The juxtaposition of the snappy, staccato appropriated footage sequences and the gentler, picturesque nature sequences symbolizes the mainstream view that there is an irreconcilable discrepancy between the natural beauty of the city’s erotic oases and the ‘scandalous’ things that people do there. While the opening news montage declares the mainstream’s homophobia and disgust, the film goes on to ask why the ‘strange balletic quality’ of cruising shouldn’t be appreciated for its own particular beauty. Cruising could be described as a wonder of social connection, and an acceptance of humanity in all its iterations, in a world of detachment and individualism.
The musical soundtrack of *Secret and Divine Signs* features an original work for percussion ensemble by composer Wally Gunn. The piece, entitled *Discothèque*, loops and cuts up-tempo, aggressive beat patterns that pay tribute to the disco music of the 1970s and the heyday of gay liberation and its bacchanalian sexuality. The composition accompanies only the sequences of appropriated footage. The nature sequences of the film proved to be more effective without music; the sound atmosphere of the various locations accompanies the interview responses, which creates contrast to the appropriated footage interludes, and heightens the perception of debauchery and licentiousness in the interviewees’ words.

Text is also a fundamental element of the film. Large, bold titles and superimpositions usher in new subjects, explain terms, offer colloquialisms, and emphasize critical phrases in the
narration. Each new nature sequence begins with onscreen text that conveys an excerpt of a poem that could arguably be about cruising. The first example is a stanza by Walt Whitman, also quoted at the beginning of this essay, from which the film’s title is taken. Whitman’s preoccupation with the idea of male ‘adhesiveness’ and his penchant for writing about his casual encounters with strangers echoed the themes of Secret and Divine Signs. Other poetry stanzas punctuate the film, serving to establish an aura of stillness after the frenetic appropriated footage sequence that precedes it, resetting the film’s pacing. Including excerpts from eminent poets’ work also functions to elevate the activity of cruising; respected artists have not found it beneath them to write about it. The quoted poems are included in this paper’s appendix.

Linking the quotes of younger and older cruisers so that they recount a common experience creates resolution in Secret and Divine Signs. The film advocates for social progress and its consequent benefits: that acceptance of cruising may help expand the definition of healthy and consensual sex; that cruising across differences in race, class, and age may seed openness and fairness in the culture and wider community.

In the film’s conclusion, statements of optimism woven together demonstrate that there is more in common than in conflict amongst those who participate in cruising activities today. Optimism is expressed about its continued practice, and about the incremental changes in attitudes towards it. In fact, most interviewees maintain a steady optimism throughout the film, returning to enthusiastic viewpoints. This is communicated through their humorous asides as much as anything else; their stories are peppered with quips and witticisms. Humor is an important counterpoint of the film, because it is one of the most unthreatening and effective ways to communicate about sex outside of sexual arousal. Through this method Secret and Divine Signs celebrates sex-positivity,
and argues for the affirmation of cruising cultures and sites in New York City, and around the world.
Methodology

*Secret and Divine Signs* is set in New York City. Limitations of time, of schedule flexibility, of mobility, and of budget, all restricted the research and production of the film, rooting it firmly in this city. Fortuitously, New York has for decades been an historic mecca for gay life; it has a wealth of cruising history and it boasts active erotic oases, most famously in the city’s large parks. Even though cruising also takes place in backrooms, bathrooms, and bars, the film shows parks as the main sites of its practice. As discussed earlier, this problematizes the perception that natural beauty and unrestricted sexual activity are antipathetic.

Pre-production of the film began with identifying the city’s active cruising sites, and planning a way to film these sites to maximize the heterogeneity of the imagery. Calls were then issued for volunteers with experience or opinions about cruising. Interviewing these volunteers was integral to the project, because the film’s narration would be based on their thoughts and opinions, and these thoughts and opinions would in turn steer the film’s direction. I sought out interview volunteers of various races and ages by targeting the community centers run by the organization SAGE (Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders, a social group for gay and lesbian senior citizens) in Chelsea, Harlem and Queens; by contacting Radical Faerie groups (informal, counter-cultural intentional communities); and by approaching other queer groups on social media. As mentioned earlier, no trans or female volunteers of any sexuality could be located for interviews, though it was possible to include male volunteers of black, white, and Latino ethnicity, and volunteers ranging in age from their mid-twenties to their mid-seventies.

The interview process was challenging: each volunteer showed a different level of comfort with the subject matter and a different idea about how they wished to participate in the project.
Since cruising is still considered a personal or sensitive topic to many, the interviews were recorded without a video component, in hope that volunteers being recorded exclusively in audio might find themselves more relaxed and open. Volunteers were also offered anonymity, and some took up the offer. Some had thought deeply and comprehensively about cruising and its wider significance, while others had thought about it only in the most corporeal sense. Some philosophical lines of questioning—Is cruising useful in establishing queer counterpublics? Can cruising as a physical act assist the intellectual crossing of race and class divides? —remained unanswered by some participants. The answers that were received varied in outlook according to age more than any other factor. Older cruisers felt that the scene in which they had participated had died, and that cruising on apps couldn’t replace the sense of secret community nurtured in the 1970s and 1980s. Younger cruisers saw apps as helpful tools, to be used in conjunction with street cruising. Younger cruisers also denied that the scene was finished, although most clarified that cruising is now predominantly restricted to locations where gay men gather in large enough numbers to become the majority; locations such as nude beaches or gay neighborhoods.

Shooting Secret and Divine Signs took place over all four seasons, echoing the continuity of cruising activity throughout any given year, a continuity that interviewees verified. Evidently cruising occurs even in the depths of winter, proving that desire knows no seasonal limits. Particular shoots were timed to pinpoint the peak of each season, so that in juxtaposition, dramatic extremes of New York City weather are made apparent. The Ramble in Central Park was filmed in fall to feature the brilliantly colored foliage; Prospect Park’s Vale of Cashmere was filmed in stark snowfall in winter; Fort Tryon Park was filmed in the blossoming spring; the beach at Fort Tilden is most favored as a cruising site during the summertime, so it seemed appropriate to film it in that season. Christopher Street Pier and the Fair Theater were filmed at night, in less overtly seasonal
weather. Additionally, The Fair Theater shoot was planned for a rainy night to capture the colorful neon signage reflected on wet roads. This brought the number of primary film shoots to six.

The collection of cruising scenes for the appropriated footage sequences of Secret and Divine Signs was an arduous process. It consisted of research; acquiring, organizing and archiving the media; scanning it for relevance; then digitizing and ingesting it for the edit process. Shots that could be construed as depicting cruising, even in films with overtly queer themes proved to have a low yield rate. Although this process took much more time than expected, enough material was eventually gathered to accompany the musical score and offer pause and levity between the more serious nature sequences of the film. Although intended to be humorous, the appropriated footage sequences also offer some of the most direct instruction on cruising technique. For ethical reasons, it was of course necessary to use footage of actors performing the act of cruising, rather than candid footage from real life, in order to show it and explain it.

Research and informal advice regarding the appropriation of film footage in Secret and Divine Signs suggest its use in the film is within the bounds of Fair Use. The film is not of a commercial nature and the imagery used has been greatly transformed, with a different character to that of its original context. The durations of the appropriations from the original works do not exceed a couple of seconds each; this is unlikely to be judged commercially harmful to the original copyright holder.

Editing took place over a period of weeks, focusing first on finding themes in the audio interviews, then matching these themes to the most appropriate nature sequences. After several edit passes, color correction, video effects and audio sweetening were applied.
Equipment Used

The shoot required:

Blackmagic Cinema Camera shooting ProRes 422 HQ QuickTime video.
Various lenses
Tripod
Zoom H2 audio device recording 24-bit stereo WAV files with a sampling rate of 48kHz

Film editing required:

Final Cut Pro X editing software
MacBook Pro hardware

Viewing the Film

A full resolution, HD video file has been provided to the library via CUNY Academic Works, in accordance with requirements for submission of the Capstone Project, however Secret and Divine Signs is also available to view online at: https://vimeo.com/199930397

Until the film is officially premiered at a film festival, viewing it on Vimeo requires a password, which is: artofcruising

The film was created with the objective of submitting it to MIX, the New York Queer Experimental Film Festival. Submissions to Mix are accepted mid-year 2017. Two other organizations that offer screening opportunities are Frameline, The San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, and Outfest, the Los Angeles LGBT Film Festival. The film will be submitted to these festivals in due course.
Conclusion

I chose the Film Track for the core of my studies at CUNY for the MALS program. My rationale for submitting a film for the Capstone Project was to expand my interest in the theoretical aspects of film to the production side of film. Having completed many essays throughout my degree program, it was appealing to submit a project in a different medium. Choosing to work in film also seemed very resonant, and a logical challenge: after critiquing so many films and filmmakers, I should make a film.

In the creative endeavor of making an art film it is inevitable that one should come up against obstacles and difficulties in the production. Secret and Divine Signs is quite a different entity to the one I initially conceived and proposed. This is partly due to the production obstacles and difficulties encountered, and partly due to the resourceful solutions that were implemented in response. Because the core of the film is built around interviews with volunteers recruited to talk about their real-life experiences of, and attitudes towards cruising, the major challenge arose when I realized that my material did not absolutely support my initial premise. This premise—that cruising as a practice had ceased to exist—was soon disproved. I learned over the course of the project that cruising is very much alive, just not in the ways that it had existed in the past. In addition, I was not always able to get the interview content that I hoped for, in order to build other nuanced arguments in the film. Most of the interviews I conducted did not get to the heart of the issues in a way that I had conceptualized, and thus I had no choice but to build the arc of the film around the responses that the interviewees gave; no doubt my inexperience as an interviewer is partly to blame for this.

Operating as a one-man crew also posed many challenges. I had to transport, carry, set up and operate video and audio equipment by myself. One advantage to this, interestingly, was that
solitude on a shoot encouraged sustained contact with my surroundings, which supported the capturing of the beauty of the deserted natural environments. Researching cruising in film for appropriable footage often threw up red herrings; much of the usable footage was only available on mixed formats and codecs, necessitating transcoding and conversion, with mixed results in terms of picture quality. Regular setbacks with software and computing equipment were to be expected, and happened. On the other hand my collaboration with the composer for the score was an artistic success, as was the recording of the music. I stand by the project as a successful work of art, despite not achieving precisely what I’d originally planned: a philosophical inquiry into the culture and practice of cruising.

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Over the years, the increased public knowledge of the existence of the LGBT community in general, and cruising in particular, has led to a kind of ‘gay panic’; an awareness of queerness before its societal acceptance, giving way to outrage and offense. This resulting attitude has shut down many of the covert cruising activities and erotic oases that thrived in the past. *Secret and Divine Signs* is an attempt to pay homage to a complex and rich culture that has survived, despite the censure of the mainstream social order. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s objective when writing their seminal essay *Sex in Public* was to foster ‘radical aspirations of queer culture building.’[^9] *Secret and Divine Signs* aims to compliment that effort. In a time when an out gay man can speak to applause at the Republican Convention, it seems evident that gay men and lesbians have almost achieved political equality, on the proviso that they conform to a traditional, heteronormative template. Enacting the divergent counter-intimacies of cruising may play a small role.

[^9]: Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public.” p548
role in exploding this normative social order, thereby expanding the possibility of inclusion for those who cannot conform to these culturally constructed constraints. Cruising equates to a chink in the armor of the hegemony, and its survival functions as much more than an outlet for an individual’s sexual expression; it is a counteroffensive to the heteronormalization of society. This short experimental film celebrates the activity’s past, looks to its future and hopes get its audience thinking about cruising and thinking about the potential benefits of a society beyond the repression of heteronormativity.
Appendices

Appendix 1: Production Schedule

10.15.15
Fall filming in The Ramble, Central Park.
02.01.16
Finalize Project Abstract, submit to MALS Executive Officer
02.08.16
Winter filming in the Vale of Cashmere, Prospect Park, Brooklyn
02.15.16
Contact SAGE organization, advertise for interview volunteers.
02.22.16
Start conducting audio interviews
02.29.16
Contact Anti-violence Project / LGBT Center Archives re: Cruising news reports
03.07.16
Filming in Fair Theater / Consider alternative cruising sites
03.14.16
Draft analysis and critique of filmic representations of cruising in Hollywood
03.21.16
Writing
03.28.16
Liaise with composer
04.04.16
First assembly edit of gathered audio / visual material
04.11.16
Audio interviews cont’d
04.18.16
Spring filming in Fort Tryon Park
05.02.16
Rough cut
06.02.16
Summer filming in Fort Tilden, Queens.
06.13.16
Incorporate digital cruising into film (stills, videos?), gather all relevant material
06.20.16
First Cut

Summer break

10.02.2016
Experiment with new form for film, try new configurations of segments for flow, as recommended by Prof. Gerstner.
Record final interview. Finish marking up all interview audio with the grabs to be included in final cut.

Film present-day Christopher Street Pier / Meatpacking / Fair Theater exterior

Capture and edit online cruising website graphics / app graphics to accompany young interviewees statements defending online cruising.

Finalize and create graphics for cruising aphorisms to be included textually in film. Add elements of critical discussion from research.

Present rough cut with all additional and late video elements present.

Re-recording and laying in of Percussion soundtrack - tweak edit to new musical recording.

Fine cut

Finalize Capstone white paper report

Submit
Appendix 2: Main Film Credits:

A Film by Terrence Hunt

Original Music Composition “Discothèque” by Wally Gunn

Performed by

Jacob Gutierrez
Nathan Matthews
Somali Wilson

Special Thanks to the Cruisers:

Jimi McNally
Charles Cole
Anonymous
Myron Baggett
D. Shoulders
Anonymous
Clyde Lloyd AKA Taffy ‘Terifik’ Titz

Thank You

Sally O’Driscoll
Wes Snelling
Evan Chapman
David Gerstner

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Appendix 3:

![Whatever happened to CRUISING in New York City?](image)

Be part of an art / documentary project about the history of cruising!

Volunteer to speak about your experiences. Your voice (credited, or anonymous) and your stories will be used to narrate a film which pays homage to the disappearing art of cruising. Don’t let the internet and iPhone apps take over—tell the young ones how cruising should be done: on the street!

Commitment: approx. one hour audio interview.

Please contact filmmaker Terrence Hunt
terrencehunt@gmail.com or (646) 283-3295

*Figure 5 Example poster seeking volunteers and aimed at older SAGE attendees*
Appendix 4:

![Example Facebook post seeking volunteers for interviews](image.png)

*Figure 6 Example Facebook post seeking volunteers for interviews*
Appendix 5: Poems on the subject of cruising quoted in the film:

*Among the Multitude*

Among the men and women the multitude,
I perceive one picking me out by secret and divine signs,
Acknowledging none else, not parent, wife, husband, brother, child,
any nearer than I am,
Some are baffled, but that one is not—that one knows me.

Ah lover and perfect equal,
I meant that you should discover me so by faint indirections,
And I when I meet you mean to discover you by the like in you.


*The Siege*

I build a tottering pillar of my blood
to walk it upright on the tilting street.
The stuff is liquid, it would flow downhill
so very quickly if the hill were steep.

How perilously do these fountains leap
whose reckless voyager along am I!
In mothering darkness, Lord, I pray Thee keep
these springs a single touch of sun could dry.

It is the instant froth that globes the world,
an image gushing in a crimson stream.
But let the crystal break and there would be
the timeless quality but not the dream.
Sometimes I feel the island of my self
a silver mercury that slips and runs,
revolving frantic mirrors in itself
beneath the pressure of a million thumbs.

Then I must that night go in search of one
unknown before but recognized on sight
whose touch, expedient or miracle,
stays panic in me and arrests my flight.

Before day breaks I follow back the street,
companied, to a rocking space above.
Now do my veins in crimson cabins keep
the wild and witless passengers of love.

All is not lost, they say, all is not lost,
but with the startling knowledge of the blind
their fingers flinch to feel such flimsy walls
against the siege of all that is not l!

*Tennessee Williams. "The Siege." Page 9*

**gaudy turnout**

if i were you, i would walk the dark night
into some brightness, a lamp-post or lit shop-front,
& stop at the door. Adjusting shoelace or smile
I wish i could find the doorsteps of the cellar-club,

the quick of your heart. how i wish i could
know for sure about tomorrow's party:
how many, who, won't be there. sensitive is the ear
of night & hears a loneliness for miles.

will there be dancing cheek-to-cheek? will someone
be recounting minutely his peculiar operation?
& is someone keeping score? will you
shut the door? Why do you groan & groan?

if I were you, a gaudy boy afflicted with joy:
sensitive is the eye of day & sees a leer for miles.

*Arthur Yap. "gaudy turnout." Page 153*

**The Ongoing Story**

I could say it's the happiest period of my life,
It hasn't got much competition! Yesterday
It seemed a flatness, hotness. As though it barely stood out
From the rocks of all the years before. Today it sheds
That old name, without assuming any new one. I think it's
still there.
It was as though I'd been left with the empty street
A few seconds after the bus pulled out. A dollop of
afternoon wind.
Others tell you to take your attention off it
For awhile, refocus the picture. Plan to entertain,
To get out. (Do people really talk that way?)

We could pretend that all that isn't there never existed
anyway.
The great ideas? What good are they if they're misplaced,
In the wrong order, if you can't remember one
At the moment you're so to speak mounting the guillotine
Like Sydney Carton, and can't think of anything to say?
Or is this precisely material covered in a course
Called Background of the Great Ideas, and therefore it isn't
necessary
To say anything or even know anything? The breath of the
moment
Is breathed, we fall and still feel better. The phone rings,
It's a wrong number, and your heart is lighter,
Not having to be faced with the same boring choices again
Which doesn't undermine a feeling for people in general and
Especially in particular: you,
In your deliberate distinctness, whom I love and gladly
Agree to walk blindly into the night with,
Your realness is real to me though I would never take any of
it
Just to see how it grows. A knowledge that people live close by is,
I think, enough. And even if only first names are ever
exchanged
The people who own them seem rock-true and marvelously
self-sufficient.

*John Ashbery. "The Ongoing Story." Page 148*

**Guilt, Desire and Love**

At the dark street corner
where Guilt and Desire
are attempting to stare
each other down
(presently, one of them
will light a cigarette
and glance in the direction
of the abandoned warehouse)  
Love came slouching along,  
and exploded silence  
standing a little apart  
but visible anyway  
in the yellow, silent, streaming light,  
while Guilt and Desire wrangled,  
trying not to be overheard  
y by this trespasser.

Each time Desire looked towards Love,  
hoping to find a witness,  
Guilt shouted louder  
and shook them hips  
and the fire of the cigarette  
threatened to burn the warehouse down.

Desire actually started across the street,  
time after time,  
to hear what Love might have to say,  
but Guilt flagged down a truckload  
of other people  
and knelt down in the middle of the street  
and, while the truckload of other people  
looked away, and swore that they  
didn't see nothing  
and couldn't testify nohow,  
and Love moved out of sight,  
Guilt accomplished upon the standing body  
of Desire  
the momentary, inflammatory soothing  
which seals their union  
(for ever?)  
and creates a mighty traffic problem.

*James Baldwin. "Guilt, Desire, and Love." Page 793*
writing for a young man on the redline train: “to his boy mistress”

All the bodies we cannot touch
are like harps. Toucht by the mind

—Robert Duncan, “Fragments of a Disordered Devotion”

writing for a young man on the redline train: “to his boy mistress”
first to praise his frame: pliable as hickory. his greasy locks waxy ears
I'll stop the world and melt with you brustling through a nearby headset

if I had time to ride this monster to the end I would: hung by handstraps
jostle through the downtown stations. each stop bringing us closer
to what? gether? perhaps: or that exit of the tunnel where I look back

and poof: no lover. men have led shameful lives for less proportioned fare
tossing greetings thick as rapunzel's hair: “anybody ever told you that you
[ugh, here it comes lads, stifle those shortles] resemble a young james dean?”

why fiddle-dee-dee, he bats his lids: the fantasy already turning to ruin
what if he debarked at my destination of pure coincidence? followed
through the coppice of the square: fox and hound, fox and hound

I'd lead him on a merry chase: pausing every few: admire a fedora
check the windows of the haberdashers and cruise the sartorial shops
until I felt his winded breathing on my neck: yawned and departed again
we could while away the afternoon just so. but at my back, etc

fresh and sprouting in chestnut-colored pubes is how I'd want him

not after the dregs of cigarettes. the years of too many scotch sours
why, I wouldn't even know what to say to one who drinks scotch sours

except, “sir.” and “tough luck about those redsox” [which it always is]
now I've spent myself in lines and lost. where is that boy of yesteryear?
let him die young and leave a pretty corpse: die with his legs in the air

D.A. Powell. "Writing for a Young Man on the Redline Train: To His Boy Mistress." Page 6
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