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The Gays Will Kill You! A Look Back on Creepy Propaganda Film *Boys Beware*

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- Still from *Boys Beware*

With the flamboyance that surrounds [Pride](#) every year, sometimes it's easy to look around and say, "What's the point?" It's a fact of life in San Francisco, Pride is as much a part of the landscape as the Golden Gate Bridge, those damned cable cars, and Fisherman's

Wharf. And with the ever-increasing corporate-ness of the festivities, it can feel like Pride is something that doesn't really belong to locals at all anymore.

[Boys Beware](#), a so-called educational film from 1961, is a great piece to watch if you want to remember why Pride is so important. Intended to literally scare teenage boys straight, *Boys Beware* is about the dangers of adult homosexuals on the hunt for adolescent prey. A lot of educational propaganda from yesteryear is so laden with cheese that watching it nowadays provides pure, campy glee. Not *Boys Beware*. From a modern perspective, it's no less bizarre than classics like *Reefer Madness* or the *Red Asphalt* snuff porn series that were passed off as driver safety films.

Boys Beware is ugly to its core. Immediately after the title credits, the screen proudly announces that the film was "produced with the cooperation of the Inglewood Police Department and the Inglewood Unified School District." For the next ten minutes, "Lt. Williams" narrates the fates of four boys who had the misfortune to encounter homosexuals at the park, the beach, or while getting ready for their paper route. "One never knows when the homosexual is about," Lt. Williams intones solemnly. "He may appear normal. It may be too late when you discover that he is mentally ill."

"Mentally ill" was the closest you could get to a charitable depiction of homosexuality in 1961. In practice, *Boys Beware* shows gay men as ruthless criminals without so much as a glimmer of conscience. Mike Merritt, a young all-American boy, accepts a ride home from a

stranger after playing basketball at the park. "He probably never realized until too late that he was riding in the shadow of death," Lt. Williams tells us. "Sometime that evening, Mike Merritt traded his life for a newspaper headline."

Mike is the only actual fatality, but boys in the other scenarios come very close to joining him. While preparing for their paper route, Denny and Jerry are approached by a man supposedly chasing two stolen bikes. Denny gets in the man's car to help track them down, and is saved only by the quick thinking of his friend Jerry, who notes the license plate number, allowing the cops to track down the car before anything happens.

In scenario number four, we're informed that "public restrooms can often be a hangout for the homosexual." Bobby and his friends fail to notice a man lurking in the restroom while they change after a day at the beach, and Bobby separates from his friends, choosing to take a shortcut home. Ominous music rises as the fully-clothed stranger follows Bobby along an empty beach, slowly closing the distance between them. But fortunately for Bobby, he recognizes the stranger following him just before going under a lonely pier, and decides to go find his friends again.

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- Those homos! Always staring at balls!

Of all the scenarios though, the most disturbing one is the first, which takes up nearly half the film's ten-minute runtime. In it, Lt. Williams tells the story of Jimmy Barnes, who develops a friendship with "Ralph," a balding, middle-aged man who apparently has had his sunglasses surgically attached to his head. Judging from Ralph, one of the identifying characteristics of "the homosexual" is that he doesn't have eyes. They meet when Jimmy hitches a ride home from a baseball game, and over the next several weeks, Jimmy and Ralph go through a montage of male bonding -- hanging out at the burger joint, fishing, shooting, miniature golf, and looking at Ralph's collection of pornographic photos. It's on the fishing trip that Lt. Williams lays out *Boys Beware's* philosophy toward queerness:

"What Jimmy didn't know was that Ralph was sick. A sickness that was not visible like smallpox, but no less dangerous and contagious. A sickness of the mind. You see, Ralph was a homosexual: a person who demands an intimate relationship with members of their own sex." Soon afterward, we see Jimmy and Ralph walk into a motel room together.

The conclusion to Jimmy's story is unique: every other boy is depicted as a helpless victim of a bloodthirsty pervert. In contrast, when Jimmy finally tells his parents, Lt. Williams says that "Ralph was arrested, and Jimmy was released on probation in the custody of his parents." What was Jimmy busted for? We never know. As you watch Jimmy leave the police station with his parents, it's hard to escape the feeling that there must be something criminal about getting molested, at least if you have the bad taste to get molested by someone of your own gender. The film is extremely ambivalent about Jimmy in a way that it isn't about the other boys. Lt. Williams's narration always tries to make us feel that Jimmy is a good, normal kid --certainly not one of *them*, like Ralph. It's hard to tell whether we're supposed to see what happened in the motel as rape, adolescent adventuring, or prostitution. It almost doesn't seem to matter: More than the others, Jimmy deliberately strays from the authority of his parents, and the law punishes him for it.

What makes my gut squirm and kick when watching *Boys Beware* isn't the homophobia itself, but the banality of it. In 1961, the film's message was no more controversial than Sid Davis Productions' other titles, like *What Made Sammy Speed?* or *ABC's of Walking*

Wisely. It was the sort of thing that the Inglewood Police Department could sponsor without comment.

Watching *Boys Beware* might make me writhe, but in a way, it also warms my heart. It's a reminder that this country has come really fucking far, much farther than anyone had a right to expect in 1961.

Watch *Boys Beware* in all its creepy glory below, but don't say I didn't warn you.

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