Queer in the Limelight:
The Aesthetic Politics of Gregg Araki

By

Lydia Williams

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Sponsor: Rachel Fabian

Second Reader: Joel Neville Anderson

Evident in The Academy's ceremonious praise of queer cinema by the likes of *Bohemian Rhapsody* (dir. Bryan Singer and Dexter Fletcher, 2018) and *Moonlight* (dir. Barry Jenkins, 2016), Hollywood and US indie filmmaking both have touted their efforts to increase representation of LGBTQIA+ stories in the 21st century. However, the varied critical and popular reception of these efforts indicates that questions related to queer representation are far from settled in "post-closet" American culture. While Hollywood has remained vastly heteronormative in the 2000s despite the increased cultural acceptance of queer identities since the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the industry's increased turn to queer genre hybrids, such as the rom-com film *Bros* (dir. Nicholas Stoller, 2022) and the recent horror franchise installment *Scream 5* (dir. Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett, 2022), point to the industry's growing recognition of the value of queer subcultures and their filmgoing practices. Compared with the proportionally sparse visibility of LGBTQIA+ identities in commercial cinema historically, these hybrids have received acclaim from a wide array of audiences and critics who view them as part of an important step in the progression of rights-oriented queer activism in the US. Such assertions can be found in popular media outlets, such as *The New York Time*'s observation that *Bros* "is hyper-conscious that it's a landmark built on a fault line. No matter how many ideas it crams into its quick-paced plot, it's doomed to fall short of representing an entire group of people — and it knows it shouldn't have to" (Nicholson, 2022).

These recent queer genre hybrids emerge at a moment in which the legacies of New Queer Cinema are being substantially revisited, in part due to the rollback of rights for queer communities launched by the Trump administration, and in part due to the devastating impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that have reframed long history of HIV/AIDS activism and its sustaining force for queer filmmaking in the 1980s–90s. The "return" of New Queer Cinema

amidst Hollywood's growing investment in queer genre narratives offers a rich juncture to examine and theorize the ways in which queer aesthetics can be understood as exceeding the "boundary-pushing" aesthetics of underground cinemas that gave rise to NQC as well as the more generic and commercially slick aesthetics of Hollywood. Films and filmmakers that have embodied a larger moment of cultural reformism are often retrospectively held accountable for social progress and representation. Now that the industry is aflutter with a renewed appreciation for Gregg Araki's *The Doom Generation* (1995) almost 30 years after its initial release, this stage in the director's career emerges as an excellent case study for engaging with queer aesthetics' excessive logics that do not straightforwardly adhere to notions of linear progress or vanguardist itineraries.

Araki's films and the critiques leveled at them reveal a number of conundrums as to how queer identities are represented and received in cinema today. He is cited as a pioneer of the New Queer Cinema, a movement in the early 1990s that saw an uptick in the circulation of queer, independent films in the global festival circuit. Araki's 1992 film *The Living End*, an anarchic and intimate portrayal of two AIDS-positive men, exemplified the revolutionary nature of the movement. Its independent, small-scale production allowed Araki to forgo conventional cinematic standards in his aesthetics, structure, and narrative. The inflammatory nature of *The Living End* and subsequent early works by Araki set a precedent for his films and US queer cinema as a whole to keep moving in radical directions that seemingly eschewed Hollywood conventions. However, the opposite began to occur as the NQC movement had "altered commercial interests to the revenue potential of gay and lesbian movies" (Griffin, 58). In what might be considered as a backlash to the aesthetics of NQC auteurs of the 1980s–90s, the 2000s saw the rise of mainstream, middlebrow queer films that adhered to classical Hollywood

cinematic codes, and offered "little more than fantasies of normativity" to LGBTQIA+ audiences (Griffin, 54). Araki's later projects appear part of the gradual movement of queer-oriented filmmaking toward mainstream filmmaking, seemingly counteracting the experimental grittiness that many critics found so special about his original films. While often cited as an "authorizing" force of Araki's auteurism, Araki's out identity as a bisexual cisgendered man has also been subject to public discussion, with critics arguing that his filmmaking engages forms of queer and straight desire in ways that have enabled his films to be seen as commercially viable productions. Araki's films and his transition from guerilla-style indie filmmaking to Hollywood productions highlight a complex moment in film criticism, queer representation, and audience reception at the turn of the 21st century. His work has been consistently polarizing in these realms, whether this is in his overindulgence in sex, violence, and vulgarity or in his later enmeshment in pop culture and commercial production.

I aim to examine how taste politics inform the critical reception of queer films through an analysis of two films directed by Gregg Araki; *The Doom Generation* (1995) and *Mysterious Skin* (2004). These films encapsulate significant shifts in Araki's career and illuminate the aesthetics and narrative structures that attach him to either avant-garde or mainstream commercial cinema tropes. Unpredictability, disorderliness, and a lack of parental guidance are all embodied in Araki's young, hedonistic, wandering protagonists, his unconventional film language, and the indecipherable trajectory of his career. Though it may be tempting to view Araki's scattered loyalty to queer representation as a product of "selling out" to the industry, I contend that his less overtly queer films dabble in an ambiguous homosocial territory that dominant discourses about the markers of radical queer cinema and the politics of taste have left obscured.

Literature Review

A key question for this project is "How does the canon-building work of film criticism frame what gets considered as 'mainstream cinema,' and how do such critical undertakings intersect with queer 'middlebrow' sensibilities that prescribe an ethical obligation for directors to accurately, diligently, and favorably represent the identities they happen to occupy?" This question acknowledges that the roots of Araki's filmmaking are inextricably entwined with the politically charged, transitional moment in US film reception and criticism of the late 1980s and early 1990s. During this period, academic film studies, in response to identity-oriented methods of cultural analysis informed by activist polemics, began to celebrate films that technically and narratively bore the marks of their makers' racial, sexual, and/or economic outsider status. Simultaneously, independent queer filmmakers like Araki were finally getting their foot in the door of emerging film festival circuits that extended subcultural gathering spaces of queer communities. B. Ruby Rich, the critic who gave the "New Queer Cinema" its name, celebrated how these films' "queerness was no more arbitrary than their aesthetics, no more than their individual preoccupations with interrogating history" (1992). Filmmakers using the medium to proudly express their sexuality would continue to be essential to those hoping to see the movement flourish. Indeed, Araki's earliest work does not shy away from representing queer issues and lifestyles in the shadow of the HIV/AIDS crisis, and the paracinematic discourses surrounding the film's role in inaugurating NQC aesthetics stamp have granted his early works with a critical legitimacy that is often withheld from his later more commercially accessible films.

While paracinematic discourses are not exclusive to NQC's emergence—as they have historically mobilized subcultural engagements with an array of "cult" cinematic texts—the inaugural NQC films' discursive positioning called attention to cultural exchanges existing outside the films' diegesis in ways that sustained engagement from critics, academics, and festival audiences. Araki's films were not just queer-themed and part of the scrappy grassroots ethos of early Gay and Lesbian Film Festival gatherings; they also engaged heavily with the paracinematic quality of excess, which posed an "explicitly political challenge to reigning aesthete discourses in the academy" (Sconce, 380). These films were challenging in their gratuitous aesthetic language and warped temporal logic. As Kristin Thompson explains, "The minute the viewer begins to notice style for its own sake or watch works which do not provide such thorough motivation, excess comes forward and must affect narrative meaning" (qtd. in Sconce, 386). The seemingly aimless direction of films like *The Living End* (1992) and *Totally Fucked Up* (1993) often nudges the viewer's attention away from the absurdity within the diegeses and towards "a more interesting drama, that of the film's construction and sociohistorical context" (Sconce, 391). All of these conditions made for a heightened amount of attention on the aesthetic choices that filmmakers like Araki, Gus Van Sant, and other movement-defining NQC directors would make, Though the films' queer subcultural markers were initially seen as a challenge to "reigning aesthete discourses in the academy" at the time of their release, today they have become incorporated into the US film canon through the institutionalization of queer cinema studies.

The experimental aesthetics, incoherent logic, nihilistic themes, and shocking visuals of *The Doom Generation* are characteristic of Araki's canonical early work, but the film also

garnered negative responses as it seemed to diverge from his original intentionality. For example, critic Christopher Kelly expresses concern about how Araki "refuses to endorse his characters' homosexual leanings" and calls his work an "example of a cinema that has denied itself growth by attacking what should be its foundations" (Kelly, 20-2). This critique decries Araki's indulgence in unrequited homoerotic attraction and his foregrounding of heterosexual relationships in the film. These aspects seem to foreshadow an eventual abandonment of unabashed queer representation and authenticity in his work. This theory is neither confirmed nor denied in the films that followed *The Doom Generation* (1995). Nevertheless, Araki's subsequent incorporation of more heterosexual subjects, movement away from formal experimentation, and perpetual return to coming-of-age stories caused many to assume that the director has nothing else to contribute to the progression of queer cinema.

Because he helped lay the foundation for the New Queer Cinema, many critics and audiences have placed an obligation on Araki to "continue to mature and vary" in order to propel the growth of the movement (Kelly, 17). As B. Ruby Rich claims, *The Living End* served as a crucial touchstone for NQC as "an existential film for a post-porn age, one that puts queers on the map as legitimate genre subjects" (1992). These are weighty accomplishments to place on a young director, and it is unsurprising that critics like Christopher Kelly were incredibly disappointed when Araki began to move away from the raw, overt depictions of homosexuality that once characterized him. In a 1999 article, he claims that queer cinema is "stuck in an almost literal adolescence" and cites Araki's *The Doom Generation* and *Nowhere* (1997) as evidence (Kelly, 17). On *Nowhere*, Kelly writes

> Araki's camera lingers on Duval's fully formed muscles; but it also captures what isn't there—no body hair, no moles, none of the scars or wrinkles or sags that come with adulthood... Araki captures a spellbinding idealization of gay sexuality—his actor becomes both the sweet-faced, likable dorky object of (fantasy) gay identification and the hard, handsome, naked object of (fantasy) gay consumption. (Kelly, 20)

So much for "post-porn age"! For Kelly, it seems that Araki sets out to titillate the viewer with hints of queer masculinity only to ultimately deprive them of any worthwhile portrayal of their identity. Yet this reading of the scene leaves out how the film's wry portrayal of adulthood, and its reluctance to move beyond adolescence to endorse a coherent sexual identity, might speak to other modes of political being that engage an alternative queer aesthetics.

Kelly's observations echo broader criticisms of Araki in which he is charged with refusing to grow up. These statements are striking considering how unanimously critics have put down Araki's arrested development as driving his films' casting of Hollywood starlets, whose youthful appearance and avowed heterosexuality appear to fly in the face of the "gritty" and anarchic aesthetics of his earlier queer protagonists. Araki's subsequent films would be harshly critiqued not just by the political conservatives he meant to aggravate to begin with, but also by his own community. Suggesting that Araki has been "frozen" in time at the age he got famous, so to speak, critics bemoan his reluctance to move beyond the coming-of-age genre. Such diagnoses regarding Araki's "failings" as a queer director, however, reflect less about Araki's aesthetic politics and more about how New Queer Cinema's paracinematic dimensions linked radical queer aesthetics early on with underground filmmaking and avant-garde experimentations, crucially

informing how filmmakers' subsequent engagements with queerness would be judged by scholars, critics, and festival programmers and audiences as legitimate and deserving of scrutiny.

Jack Halberstam's theorization of the "art of failure" offers an alternative framing of Araki's contributions to queer cinema aesthetics. Besides linking failure to queerness and claiming that failure "preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood," Halberstam explores multiple linkages between queer representation and a uniquely adolescent state of knowing (3). Halberstam advocates for a totally reworked understanding of linearity in the sense that the regulating processes of "growing up" as we know it are only conducive to strictly heteronormative lifestyles. Halberstam's reframing of the anarchic potential of adolescence is applicable to diegetic and extradiegetic conditions of Araki's films that reach far beyond the initial framings of queer aesthetics and politics mapped in early NQC films.

Indeed, following Halberstam, Araki's work can be viewed as a "launching pad for alternatives" created through " the intellectual worlds conjured by losers, failures, dropouts, and refuseniks" (Haberstam, 7). In Araki's young adult subjects, this focus on more timid manifestations of queerness speaks to Nick Salvato's observation that "embarrassment 'is' (1) a quintessentially adolescent feeling, which arises when (2) there is an exposure of the performative self, (3) in a social or relational situation (whether real or imagined, actual or hypothesized)" (685). Foregrounding embarrassment in a decades-long rumination on the adolescent stage of gay life can easily be read as "confused, self-hating, and puny" for a director that is queer himself (Kelly, 23). These criticisms neglect to consider how Araki has been using alternative modes of subversion in his sly incorporation of queerness into mainstream cinema, often simply decried as "content that will appeal to as many [taste and culture] publics as

possible" (Gans, 111). As queer cinema becomes progressively more acceptable in the mainstream, we should acknowledge how this has in many ways sterilized the image of gay life. Scholar F. Hollis Griffin points to how middlebrow queer films released in the late 1990s and 2000s neglect the agitational aesthetics of NQC for classical Hollywood linear storytelling. These films also foreground individual queer stories and minimize structural inequalities, providing the "normative fantasies" of being able to transcend these and achieve happiness (Griffin, 54). This depoliticized, neoliberal sentiment has proliferated in mainstream queer films ever since and can be observed in popular releases like *Love, Simon* (Greg Berlanti, 2018) and *Bros* (Nicholas Stoller, 2022).

Araki's portrayals of homosexuality and queer themes do register an ambiguity that is not present in the iconoclastic aesthetics of his early films. Yet this ambiguity should not be conflated with an accession to "normative fantasies" of queer neoliberal subjectivity. Even as his films' budgets and mainstream appeal have grown, Araki remains committed to complicating unitary logics of queer subjectivity through addressing taboo subjects and deploying fantastical themes to contemplate the queer logics of arrested development and its implied art of failing, warping the presumed potentiality of youth in a trend that evolves in his commercial films *Mysterious Skin* (2004) and *White Bird in a Blizzard* (2014). Attending to this critical trajectory in Araki's films spanning underground and commercial filmmaking contexts holds the promise of engaging previously foreclosed "knowledge practices that refuse both the form and the content of traditional canons," that "may lead to unbounded forms of speculation, modes of thinking that ally not with rigor and order but with inspiration and unpredictability" (Halberstam, 10)

The Doom Generation

The Doom Generation is the second installment in what is known as Araki's "Teen Apocalypse Trilogy," following his smaller production *Totally Fucked Up* (1993) and ending with *Nowhere* (1997). Each film deals with teen promiscuity and despondency in a distinctly juvenile, nihilistic tone evocative of the nineties grunge scene in which they take place. Writer Harry M. Benshoff describes this run of films, which center "young multicultural post punk queers", as "raucous and edgy and in some ways less intellectually demanding than those of his New Queer peers" (232). The coarse, unserious quality alluded to here is another aspect of Araki's work that has caused him to be a controversial character in the queer cinema canon. With its bountiful bathroom humor and raunchy dialogue about sex, *The Doom Generation* and its counterparts hardly try to present themselves as sophisticated portraits of the queer experience. Thus, Araki's authorial voice is inevitably problematic when read as synonymous with an inherently political "movement" in cinema.

Ruby Rich hints at how canon formation of this nature can be retroactively unhelpful in the reception of works like Araki's in a 2000 *Sight and Sound* article:

> First of all, from the beginning the New Queer Cinema was a more successful term for a moment than a movement. It was meant to catch the beat of a new kind of film-and video-making that was fresh, edgy, low budget, inventive, unapologetic, sexy and stylistically daring. (Rich, 22)

The Doom Generation's opening subtitle "A Heterosexual Movie By Gregg Araki", while contradictory at first glance, falls in line with this description as it cheekily calls attention to Araki's then-famously queer identity. Queerness is more of an ideological subtext within the film

than a narrative driver. As I will soon explore, this more subtle approach to the subject of homosexuality can offer an insightful commentary on the queer experience not always found in overtly gay movies that adhere to normative romantic conventions. Of course, to understand Araki's breach into heterosexual storytelling as completely symbolic would deny that queerness exists on the periphery of the film's central, heterosexual love story. *Doom* is ripe with depictions of gay denial, both interpersonally and societally as it crescendos with a disturbingly violent assertion of homophobic neonazi bigotry. The film's nihilistic and nonsensical tones, constant foregrounding of heterosexual love and sex, and brief departure into highly politicized commentary make it almost impossible to pin it down to a singular sentiment.

For these reasons, *The Doom Generation* is a helpful starting point to begin to understand Araki as a subject of criticism and as an active player in the direction American queer cinema would take. At what point are Araki's graphic sex scenes no longer considered "stylistically daring" but just plain exploitative? When sex occurs between a man and a woman? Perhaps we are so accustomed to the objectification of women's bodies in cinema that we too easily dismiss depictions of female sexuality. And were these choices simply geared towards the sensationalist, dominantly heterosexual market? I have found it appropriate to address such anxieties through a framework commonly used to understand "bad film objects" as cultural indicators. After all, the original and loudest critics of the New Queer Cinema - right-wing political forces - "lambasted the films as pornographic and used them as 'bad objects' in the fight to defund public art projects" (Benshoff, 220). Jeffrey Sconce coined the term "paracinema" to describe a "counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus" (372). He categorizes audiences who express an appreciation for low-brow cinema as "exiles from the legitimizing functions of the academy," an institution that is only interested in "the dominant

interests as a form of cultural coercion" (379, 381). The paracinema community, varying from everyday filmgoers to academic film scholars, read exploitation cinema and other poorly-made film objects with the same amount of attention to detail leveled at commercial and high-brow cinema. This is by no means intended to denounce Araki as an incompetent director. Rather, these readings help demonstrate how his failure to adhere to traditional codes of cinematic coherence can initiate a democratized understanding of cinema's meaning-making power.

Another link between paracinema and how we can read Araki's queer filmmaking is the significance of conditions existing outside a film's diegesis - whether this is education, access, or societal adversity. While *The Doom Generation* is more aesthetically sophisticated and (slightly) more financially supported than any of the films that precede it, it can still be understood through the cinematic concept of excess, characteristic of "bad objects." As Sconce writes, "paracinematic culture celebrates the systematic 'failure' or 'distortion' of conventional cinematic style by 'auteurs' who are valued more as 'eccentrics' than as artists, who work within the impoverished and clandestine production conditions typical of exploitation cinema" (385). Further, "a film's failure to conform to historically delimited codes of verisimilitude calls attention to the text as a cultural and sociological document and thus dissolves the boundaries of the diegesis into profilmic and extratextual realms" (Sconce, 387). One can easily compare the appeal of Araki's "dreadfully cliched" punk indie films associated with the NQC to how the queer identity of the director Ed Wood is "key to the paracinematic positioning of his films as a form of counter-cinema" (Sconce, 385, 389). Not unlike the oppressive tastes of the academy that they claim to reject, however, paracinematic fans also "situate themselves in opposition to Hollywood cinema and the mainstream US culture it represents"—themes that Araki's films

engage with unabashedly. As I will demonstrate in the following analysis, the extradiegetic subtext of *Doom* offers more to queer critical discourse than its narrative initially suggests.

The audience is informed in the first few frames that the film will be absolutely saturated with biblical and macabre symbolism. A large flaming sign that reads "welcome to hell" casts flickering red light on a pit of smash-dancing bodies in the hardcore nightclub where we meet our protagonists. Amy (Rose McGowan) searches for her "skull lighter" and becomes agitated by a burly man that is prodding her for drugs. She flips him off, a close-up shot showing off her skull ring. Amy urges her boyfriend Jordan (James Duvall) to leave, to which he leans his head on her shoulder wistfully and responds, "K…wanna go to heaven?". "Heaven" turns out to be the interior of Amy's car outside the club where we hear the two unsuccessfully try to have sex. The lighting is now blue and white, and the establishing interior frame of the car is a slow zoom-out from a severed Jesus' head placed in the middle of the rearview mirror. Jordan apologizes for his inability to perform, admitting that he's afraid of catching AIDS. She challenges this by claiming that they are both virgins, but the conversation is dropped and the two smoke cigarettes from a pack marked with a skull and crossbones. They have a brief, existential conversation that is punctuated when Amy muses, "there just is no place for us in this world" (5:12). Only seconds after, a man is suddenly slammed against the windshield outside, cutting between their silhouetted faces. This turns out to be Xavier (Johnathon Schaech), a heady bisexual drifter who will continue to show up at precisely the right moment and insert himself into their relationship.

This initial sequence wastes no time in establishing the kind of angst-imbued dialogue, extremely literal symbolism, and unlikely coincidences that will continue to drive and proliferate the narrative. Realism is almost completely neglected in favor of a completely stylized vision of the world. The protagonists are no exception; each behaves more like a caricature than a truly

nuanced human being. Amy is pessimistic, uptight, and has a heavy-handed, snarky remark for just about every situation. Jordan, on the other hand, is unwaveringly optimistic, permissive, and a bit dim-witted. Xavier, the designated queer, hardly utters a sentence that isn't dripping with crude sexual intention. All of this can easily be read as over-the-top without any clear intention, especially when so little of the film is grounded in reality. Quoting an entry from *Zontar*, a popular “bad film” fanzine, Sconce compares the effect of “Transparent play-acting; mumbling incompetence; passionate scenery-chewing; frigid woodenness” to “the Surrealist notion of the ‘marvelous’” which “provides a defamiliarized view of the world by merging the transcendentally weird and the catastrophically awful” (385-6). We need only look to the severed talking head or shotgun-slinging fast food worker for evidence of this effect. “For the paracinematic community” Sconce writes, “such moments of impoverished excess are a means toward collapsing cinema’s fourth wall, allowing the profilmic and the extratextual to mesh with the diegetic drama” (391). It is through these means of excess that *The Doom Generation* generates its meaning. Each character occupies a clear positionality that, in dealing with each other and their extraneous circumstances, evokes larger societal conditions surrounding queerness and sexuality in a heterosexist world.

I would like to suggest that the film’s numerous religious symbols and warnings—signs that read “the rapture is coming”, “pray for your lost soul”, etc., Xavier’s Jesus tattoo on his penis, “666” cropping up in every possible instance—suggest a loose Catholic allegory amongst the three protagonists. Simply put, this foreboding religious imagery seems to directly allude to vigilantly anti-gay sentiments leveled by Christian conservatives at the time of the film’s release. Beneath their punk attitudes and aesthetics, Amy and Jordan start out as a naive, straight, virginal couple while Xavier is the opposite—a demon who follows them from hell, so to speak. The

devilishly handsome bisexual is coded as an ungodly influence over the young couple in more ways than one, the most obvious being his flair for sexual temptation. In their first scene together (and for the rest of the film) he rides in the middle backseat of the car, leaning forward with blood dripping from his mouth to evoke a “devil on your shoulder” image. He even hovers at Jordan's shoulder while he consoles Amy following the murder of the Kwik E Mart owner, moving progressively closer until they are touching (23:45-24:15). Although Amy frequently succumbs to Xavier’s temptation, she is resoundingly opposed to his character. She remarks that “there’s something evil about him” (35:25) and literally calls him “a demon from hell” (1:12:17). He often mocks her for ironic conservatism, telling her that “guilt is for married old people” and calling her “Miss America” and “Little Miss Polly Pure Heart” on separate occasions.

These dynamics can very well be interpreted as the film literally demonizing queer sexuality. However, queer subtext considered, the relationship between Amy and Xavier rather points to the hypocrisy of this demonization that comes from a society that is all too comfortable with lust and temptation when it is heterosexual. Xavier is introduced to the film while being brutalized by men who call him a “cock sucker”. He is thrown against Amy’s windshield as if he is symbolically responding to “there just is no place for us in this world” with “how do you think it feels for a person like me?”. Xavier’s inherently different treatment within this harsh societal landscape is alluded to again as he watches TV while Amy and Jordan have sex in the bathtub. The news reports that a skull earring belonging to Jordan has been found at the Kwik E Mart crime scene. The female newscaster describes this type of earring as “often worn by homosexuals, Satanists, and members of other dangerous cult groups”. Her male counterpart cuts in, reminding her that “a lot of people, especially trendy teenagers following the latest fad, kids who are otherwise perfectly normal, don’t they wear earrings similar to the ones shown here?”

(18:15-18:42). Xavier rolls off the bed during this spiel and approaches the doorway to the bathroom, peering through the crack in the door to watch Amy and Jordan in the act. This physical barrier further emphasizes the difference between them that has just been described on television. The gratuitousness of Xavier's voyeurism and masturbation in this scene makes its potential meaning easy to miss, and perhaps this is intentional. The film directly calls attention to these unbalanced dynamics before snapping back into its very literal reenactment of stereotypes that over-sexualize and trivialize male queer existence, with Xavier embodying the grossly overstated, accusatory rhetoric expressed in the news broadcast.

In contrast to these highly polarizing characters is the docile, blissfully ignorant Jordan. While he may come across as a blank slate, Jordan is also indicative of important conditions existing outside the film. Not only does his naive optimism help balance out *Doom*'s nihilistic tones—thus making the film easier to market and for mainstream audiences to enjoy—but he is also part of a common theme throughout Araki's work: arrested development. Araki has been criticized for dwelling in the coming-of-age genre, focusing perpetually on dazed and confused adolescence and young adulthood. Some critics and audiences have expressed an urgency for queer directorial vision to move on and grow up—to stop making gay stories about coming out and experiencing unrequited love from straight people. To this, I would like to suggest Araki's intentionality with his choice to dwell in the counterintuitive, and his deliberate engagement with mainstream narrative and aesthetic modes in this moment of his increasing popularity. The alternatively generative resonance of Jordan's passive masculinity undermines what could be considered adverse about the director's failure to align with progressive queer objectives in culture production.

To begin with, Jordan is an example of how a clueless straight male character can act as a vessel to communicate non-dominant gender hierarchies in film. His demeanor often borders on childlike; his frequent need to use the bathroom or eat something often punctuates scenes before they've reached a satisfying conclusion. In addition, he reacts earnestly to the absurd world around him in a manner that is unbound to typical learned male traits like possessiveness and fragile masculinity. His ego is unaffected when it is clear that Amy has slept with Xavier, happily falling into a routine of sharing her physical affection. Jordan exudes a lighthearted passivity more typically synonymous with femininity. This convention-bending effect of male "stupidity" is explored in Jack Halberstam's book *The Queer Art of Failure*, which explores new frontiers of understanding masculinity and sexuality, born out of being an outcast of a hegemonic society. It describes this ostracized state of being as intrinsically linked to queerness in that these communities have failed to conform to heteronormative standards, pushing them to create and communicate in alternative ways. Cinema is no exception. Araki's first few films are examples of how "failing" to meet industry standards can be a deliberate "refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing" (Halberstam, 11-12). Araki retains this uninhibited sentiment in clueless characters like Jordan. If not entirely evident due to the film's stunning cinematography by Jim Fealy, this "wondrous anarchy of childhood" is preserved within the diegesis itself, making it a highly self-reflexive commentary on his own voice within the world of movie making (Halberstam, 3).

Halberstam explores multiple linkages between queer representation and a uniquely adolescent state of knowing. Much like *Doom*'s deliberate immaturity and incoherent logic, the white male stupidity in *Dude, Where's My Car?* (2000)

> refuses a straight and Oedipal logic for understanding the transmission of ideas. The dudes are infantile (peeing and shitting everywhere, needing to be fed and cared for) but parentless, and in the absence of wisdom passed down from father or mother (but probably father) to son they are enlightened by peer relations that predictably preclude advancement, progress, and learning… There is plenty of evidence in queer culture that we simply allow the rhythms of Oedipal modes of development to regulate the disorderliness of queer culture. (Halberstam, 69-71)

These assertions highlight how Araki's similarly debaucherous vision of American youth, regardless of any absence of overtly homosexual action, engages with fundamentally queer experiences of growing up. In *The Doom Generation*, parents are only briefly mentioned and never successfully contacted by teenagers Amy and Jordan. We instead witness the two become "enlightened" by Xavier in all of his charismatic depravity, challenging their underlying normativity with his unbounded sexual expression and anarchic disregard for the law. Amy's character noticeably evolves after time spent in the unconventional trio dynamic; her harsh judgemental attitude subsides significantly just as her all-black outfit is traded out for a pink dress, transparent raincoat, and cat-eye sunglasses. Through Xavier's queer influence, Amy and Jordan experience the kind of alternative modes of kinships that "predictably preclude advancement" but are nonetheless greatly influential in the absence of supportive parental figures.

The inverse can be observed in the more sterilized gay films from the turn of the century, such as *Gypsy 83* (Todd Stephens, USA, 2001), when LGBTQIA+ citizens expressed a desire to

participate in heteronormative practices like marriage and childrearing more than ever before (Griffin, 62). Harry M. Benshoff observes in his 2006 book *Queer Images* that the "token queer inclusion within the public sphere" has caused many modern queers to "work to be accepted into traditionally heterosexist institutions" rather than "championing a new sexual ethos" (268-269). On this push towards normativity, Halberstam writes

> An ideology of family pushes gays and lesbians toward marriage politics and erases other modes of kinship in the process. In an article in *The Nation* Lisa Duggan and Richard Kim argue that contemporary marriage politics manages to unite conservatives by consolidating support for the nuclear and conjugal family through marital support programs and a revival of covenant marriage while dividing progressive groups by creating anxiety and conflict about the status of same-sex marriage rights. (71)

This cultural moment encapsulates the kind of commercial terrain that many NQC fans hoped Araki would not fall into, especially following his most heterosexual film to date, *Splendor* (1999). Queer cinema seemed to be moving into a depoliticized state of complacency that neglected radical aesthetics and stories for continuity editing and happy endings. As F. Hollis Griffin observes, these more mainstream queer objects "suggest that more recent improvements in the lives of sexual minorities have become so widespread that the cultural problems addressed by New Queer Cinema are largely in the past" (60).

At the 2023 4K restoration screening of *The Doom Generation* in Brooklyn, NY, Araki explained how a producer of *The Living End* promised to get him "real money" if he made a heterosexual movie -

> So, in my sort of punk rock bratty way I made the queerest, gayest, straight movie ever… I was just thinking of it being very much like a Trojan Horse. The poster is gorgeous Amy Blue and her tits and there's a lot of straight stuff going on…so, the idea behind it is that it would sort of span everybody of all persuasions in a way that an audience that was not going to go see *The Living End* about two gay guys with guns in their mouths. (Araki, 2023)

Instead of overt acts of male homosexuality, it is subtle gestures, such as Xavier's intense gaze and flirtatious body language towards Jordan, as well as Jordan's playful albeit clueless receptiveness towards this, that makes *Doom* a queer film. Halberstam writes, "patriarchal power, in some sense, takes two: one to be the man and the other to reflect his being a man". In *The Doom Generation*, this "doubling" can result in a "swirl and eddy of homoerotic attraction" that is not fully realized but nonetheless exists in an incorporeal space (Halberstam, 66).

Araki's exploration of unrealized queer sexuality can also be interpreted through Nick Salvato's critical observations on embarrassment; a "quintessentially adolescent feeling" that "arises when there is an exposure of the performative self" (685). Being the most inclined to criticize and reject themselves, adolescent characters demonstrate the "exteriorizations to the inwardness of pathos"; an experience of feeling the "self's otherness as it announces itself to others" (Salvato, 689). Cliche or not, a film about teenagers grappling with the less socially-accepted aspects of themselves in film can reveal the complex social forces that contribute to this rejection.

The seeds for mainstream appeal are planted in *The Doom Generation*, not just through heterosexual characters and teen drama, but also through its engagement with road movie conventions and his use of multiple celebrity cameos. As Araki explained at the screening in Brooklyn, his "aesthetic and worldview", things he was pushed to develop in the auteurship-centered climate of film school, have been "always so rooted in pop culture". More specifically, he attributes his inclusion of celebrity cameos to the "Lynchian surreal aspect of the movie… to me it wasn't like 'oh, cheesy cameo! Here's Julie from *The Love Boat*!' It was more the idea that when you're having a dream, the faces that appear in your dream are always familiar… I wanted this film to feel like that kind of waking dream state" (Araki, 2023). Araki's unironic and playful engagement with these middle-brow tropes exemplifies—despite the paracinematic community's overwhelming rejection of mainstream Hollywood filmmaking—what Jeffery Sconce describes as "a stylistic and thematic deviance born, more often than not, from the systematic failure of a film aspiring to *obey* dominant codes of cinematic representation" (Sconce, 385). Once Araki became assimilated into the industry, overtly gay films like *Mysterious Skin* (2004) could reach more audiences than ever before.

Mysterious Skin

Mysterious Skin was undoubtedly a large departure from Araki's previous works. The film, which the director adapted from Scott Heim's 1995 novel, follows the separate lives of two boys in Hutchinson, Kansas who were sexually abused by their little league baseball coach. Brian Lackey (Bradey Corbet) is an introvert who is convinced that he was abducted by aliens during these experiences, which he suppressed in childhood. His counterpart Neil McCormick (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) is fully cognizant of the "relationship" he shared with the coach—so much so

that it informs almost every aspect of his life going forward. Neil's existence is overly sexualized, and he begins working as a gay prostitute at the age of 15. The film oscillates between the two boys' lives until they ultimately reconnect through their mutual queer friend Eric (Jeffery Licon), and the truth is finally revealed to Brian. *Mysterious Skin* garnered positive responses from a wide range of audiences and critics, which surprised Araki due to the story's disturbing elements (Dossi). The film's broader appeal can most easily be attributed to its conformity to classical Hollywood cinematic practices, such as continuity editing, its immersive lack of excess, and its wholesome moral undercurrent. Unlike the blaring, hardcore soundtrack of *The Doom Generation*, Harold Budd and Robin Guthrie's soothing, dream-like score sets a sentimental, nostalgic tone for the film. Formal experimentation and tonal erraticness take a backseat while taboo queer subjects pervade the diegesis. In the following analysis, I aim to illustrate how the affective experience created through this engagement with mainstream cinematic modes expands and diverges from Araki's foundational films, occupying a sweet spot in audience and critical engagement.

Like *The Doom Generation, Mysterious Skin* engages with fantastical elements to articulate some of the nuances of queer existence. Instead of foreboding Catholic imagery, it is *Skin*'s alien mystery plot that registers the complexities of non-normativity through the language of popular cinema. While Neil's sexual identity and memories are well-defined, Brian's are unclear. On a postcard to Neil that features an image of a UFO, Eric writes about him, "He's not even gay, I don't think. In fact, his vibe is kind of weirdly asexual" (58:24). The only other hint at Brian's sexuality comes moments later when he rejects the aggressive sexual advances made by Avalyn (Mary Lynn Rajskub), a young woman who believes she has also been abducted by aliens in the past. Although Brian's speculations turn out to be only a theory that he has

developed to account for the sexual abuse he could not process as a child, the moment that he and his family witness a UFO in the sky above their backyard remains unexplained (5:38-6:20). The logistics of alien existence ultimately fades from view, however, as the topic acts rather as a conduit for personal drama to occur.

The alien mystery of *Mysterious Skin* serves as a mode for the characters to form bonds through trauma that is physically invasive in nature. Although Avalyn's story is left open-ended, one can speculate that she too is repressing physical and/or sexual abuse. Brian initially finds Avalyn when her story is featured in a "World of Mystery" TV special on UFOs, which he watches with his mother. In a tone that is reminiscent of the dramatized news broadcast in *The Doom Generation*, the show introduces Avalyn as a 32-year-old, unmarried woman who lives with her father in a small town, working only part-time. Her appearance is coded as either much younger or older; she wears a long, high-collar nightgown, a pink cardigan, no makeup, and her hair in a tight bun. Her bedroom is frozen in childhood and she walks with a crutch, which is also never explained. As if any one of these does not signify otherness, the narrator states "But, there is something unusual about Avalyn…" (30:35). Avalyn reveals that she underwent hypnotic regression to try to account for the blank spots in her memory, through which she learned that she had been abducted over 20 times. She describes her first "abduction" at the age of 6, "It was dark, and we got lost driving down a dirt road. Grandpa lost control of the car and we went into a ditch…" She recounts a stereotypical abduction scene of being beamed into the sky by a bright light, laid on a cold metal table, and examined by green, big-headed figures with bulbous eyes over a TV reenactment of the scenario. Glaring signs that Avalyn may be a victim of abuse by the elders in her life are ignored by the program to propel a fantastical, sensationalist narrative.

When Brian visits Avalyn at the farm where she lives with her father, these speculations are supported further. Her father leers in the distance, seeming threatened by the presence of an 18-year-old boy. She later shows him a scar on her inner thigh that she received when she was "taken", which she believes is the site where the aliens implanted a tracking device. Brian is eager to listen to Avalyn's convictions about being abducted, finding kinship in their shared experience of losing pieces of their memory. Juxtaposed with previous scenes of Neil interacting with his punk friends, turning tricks at the park, and lounging on the couch in a sexually charged scene with his drunk mother, the image of Brain and Avalyn together depicts a reverse side of sexual otherness. The pair embody the queer/non-normative experience of remaining stuck in the juvenile state when one's sexual difference is realized. They are dorky, socially isolated, and non-sexual; a far cry from Araki's typical images of delinquent misfits represented by Neil's social world. Despite these surface-level contradictions, however, the two boys are inextricably linked through their shared childhood trauma. Avalyn vocalizes this unknowingly when she tells Brian "Your subconscious is where all your memories are buried. For you and me and people like us, almost every single thing we do stems from our being abducted" (39:57). "Abducted", here, being a substitute for "molested". The alien plotline, which initially reads as a fantastical tonal balancing device, is simultaneously the catalyst for Brain's self-discovery, leading him to alternative, queer kinships with Eric and Neil. As Halberstam writes, "resistance lurks in the performance of forgetfulness itself, hiding out in oblivion and waiting for a new erasure to inspire a new beginning" (69).

Family life, a topic commonly handled in mainstream cinema, is one that Araki's work had yet to breach before *Mysterious Skin*. Parental figures are notably absent from his previous films, allowing for the kind of adolescent debauchery of *The Doom Generation* to play out

unhindered. Here, the film illustrates the protagonists' complex relationships with their parents as both children and young adults. Its linear timeline, illustrated clearly with occasional title cards of the season and year, helps achieve this. We are privy to the dynamics between parent and child that shape who Neil and Brian are for the rest of the film. Brain's mother is caring and overly protective, and his father is distant and critical. After the two separate, Brian loses consistent contact with his father. Neil comes from a typical broken home; he lacks a father figure while his alcoholic mother seems to prioritize her flings with different men over her son's safety. Both experience varying levels of neglect that make them accessible for their coach to prey upon, with Neil experiencing the brunt of the abuse. As a result, Brian turns out to be quiet and sensitive while Neil is completely reckless and seems to struggle with basic empathy. As his best friend since childhood, Wendy (Michelle Trachtenberg), tells Eric, "Where normal people have a heart, Neil McCormick has a bottomless black hole" (34:33).

Unlike Araki's previous queer-coded misfits, Neil and Brian's otherness can be traced to shortcomings in their respective upbringings. The film resorts to normative modes of storytelling in this way—"The deployment of the concept of *family*, whether in hetero or homo contexts, almost always introduces normative understandings of time and transmission" (Halberstam, 71). At the same time, this inclusion of family drama illustrates how heteronormative structures often fail, to then demonstrate the value of alternative support systems that can replace them. The film's foregrounding of intimate friendship bonds between Neil, Wendy, and Eric—and eventually Brian and Eric—exemplifies this. For example, we watch Brain celebrate his 19th birthday with Eric, who wears black lipstick and silver face paint for the occasion. When Brian announces that he is drunk for the first time in his life, Eric jokes, "I'm corrupting you… at last!" (1:13:20). Eric then points out Brian's alien sketch lying beside them, insisting on his friend's

artistic talent and inquiring about its design from the waist down, which is very obviously the legs of his little league coach. Later that night, with the help of liquid courage, Brain finally confronts his father about his neglect during the challenging months following his sexual abuse and onward. As an outcast who previously spent most of his free time with his mother, Brian experiences formative moments and self-discovery through his connection with Eric. Here lies another example of how Araki "refuses a straight and Oedipal logic for understanding the transmission of ideas", not through a caricature of nativity like Jordan but rather in a more literal narrative sense (Halberstam, 69).

However, critical reception of the film would often rather narrativize this moment in Araki's career as part of an inevitable straightforward, linear progression. In a 2005 review of the film, critic Joel Dossi praises the film's tonal shift, stating,

> If *Mysterious Skin* is a stylistic departure for Araki, his protagonists are still well-grounded in the filmmaker's counterculture past. Neil and Brian are certainly members of an alienated America; however, Araki lets his characters and their lives tell the story, rather than relying on his past filmic trademarks: text laden scene breaks, omni-sexual gratification or comic violence complete with severed heads that talk. *Mysterious Skin* is an even more powerful film as a result of Araki's maturation. (Dossi, 4)

A similar sentiment is echoed in a *The New York Times* article from the same year;

> "Mysterious Skin" is infused with remarkable tenderness and beauty. These are not words you usually associate with this director, whose previous films—including "The Living End," "The Doom Generation" and one whose title I cannot quote here—often valued shock over feeling and provocation over compassion. What those movies did have, sometimes to a fault, was a fearless, reckless honesty that Mr. Araki has not lost, even as he has acquired a deeper sense of story, character and emotion. "Mysterious Skin" is the work of a one time bad boy who has grown up without losing his ardent sympathy for the wildness of youth. (Scott, 2005)

These evaluations highlight the kind of restrictive lenses that critics were beginning to view Araki's body of work through. *Mysterious Skin* happened to satiate two popular critical expectations of the director; that his films would deal in explicitly homosexual content, and that his queer directorial vision would "continue to mature and vary" to propel the progression of the New Queer Cinema (Kelly, 17). Critics that heralded Araki's early films as queer cultural artifacts for their intrepid trashiness seemed rather contented by this tonal and aesthetic "maturation". This through-line evokes Bourdieu's concept of the 'new style autodidact'; an educated devotee of "arts, not yet fully legitimate, which are disdained or neglected by the big holders of educational capital" that "offer a refuge or a revenge to those who, by appropriating them, secure the best return on their cultural capital (especially if not fully recognized scholastically) while at the same time taking credit for contesting the established hierarchy of legitimacies and profits" (Qtd. in Sconce, 379). The phrasing of these critical commendations of *Mysterious Skin* reveal a common tendency for audiences high in cultural capital to appreciate

low-brow forms so long as they can be legitimated through the lens of fundamentally traditional frameworks of taste.

Mysterious Skin is ultimately the kind of independent film that catches the attention of critics for its “conscious transgression of conventions by a filmmaker looking to critique the medium aesthetically and/or politically” rather than the transgressive implications of its failures (Sconce, 385). As journalist Peter Knegt predicted in an *IndieWire* interview with Araki, *Skin* would be nominated for about a dozen prestigious awards across the globe. However, the director’s response to Knegt’s projections is telling— “I just wanted the film to have an emotional impact on people in the way that the book did. ‘Mysterious Skin’ just devastated me when I read it. I was crying by the time I finished it" (Knegt, 2005). According to Araki, it was his personal and emotional connection with the source material that informed the film’s uncharacteristic “tenderness and beauty” which retroactively earned the approval of many audiences and critics. Neil’s story in particular speaks to the devastating shared experience of many out queers who have traversed the dangerous sexual landscape of urban centers during the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic; a focal point that kickstarted the director’s legacy in the first place. In fact, essentially every moment the film spends with Neil after he joins Wendy to live in New York City dwells in this challenging territory. Much to his best friend’s discontent, he continues to perform sex work and becomes harrowed by his experiences, which are no longer tied to the thrill of teen rebellion as they had been in his hometown. His new encounters range from off-putting to outright assault on all accounts, underscoring the heightened social and health-related dangers of the era on an extremely personal level, given that we have just followed Neil’s character since childhood. *Mysterious Skin*’s markedly earnest tone and straightforward

construction are more so symptoms of the kind of emotional resonance the source material demands than they are demarkations of Araki's "maturation" as a director.

Conclusion

As time would show, the director had no intention of following the linear progress narratives set in place for him by critics. Even Joel Dossi, who is guilty of this in his review, acknowledges how Araki has claimed that he felt "labels ghettoized him as a filmmaker" (1). Araki went on to direct *Smiley Face* (2007), a lighthearted stoner comedy written by Dylan Haggerty and starring Anna Ferris. The film appealed to middle-brow popular tastes and is almost completely devoid of sexuality. Next came the queer, sex-filled college joy ride *Kaboom* (2010) followed by the heterosexual melodrama mystery *White Bird in a Blizzard* (2014). Araki has more recently dabbled in television directing, including his own Starz comedy miniseries *Now Apocalypse* (2019), which draws heavy inspiration from *Nowhere* (1997), as well episodes for *Riverdale* (2017-2023) and *Dahmer* (2022). I argue that Araki's unbounded directorial route is just as indicative of "modes of thinking that ally not with rigor and order but with inspiration and unpredictability" as his most subversive diegetic worlds (Halberstam, 10). However, his dealings with mainstream and middle-brow productions seemed to have dissuaded the interest of film scholarship into the 2010s. Deconstructing any potential box that audiences have attempted to restrict him to, Araki is a true renegade of traditional cinematic taste metrics.

The very recent cultural enthusiasm for Araki's work could have promising indications for the future of queer cinema now that dominant trends in film criticism seem to be coming full circle. A new generation of critical audiences are aware of the ironic and at times hypocritical

rhetoric of film scholarship which often confines definitions of queer expression in the name of diversity and political advancement. The passionate response to *The Doom Generation* from queer audiences in 2023 comes at a time when recent discourses are beginning to question the liberal media's strict preference for completely non-offensive content. These criticisms have no doubt risen in response to the blatant corporatization of LQBTQIA+ symbols in recent years. Major companies from Google to McDonalds signal their "inclusivity" with the rainbow flag each June, often without making substantial (if any) contributions to the communities they claim to support.

Needless to say, the hyper capitalist adoption of Gay Pride has completely reworked our cultural landscape since the releases of *The Doom Generation* and *Mysterious Skin.* Now, it seems prudent to problematize the staunch political correctness of queer media production as this is so often a virtue-signaling tactic used to ensure a product's marketability. We should continue to look to artists like Araki, a director who's career-long failure to adhere to expectations inspires alternative understandings of aesthetic and sexual expression—subjects that are too often condensed into standardized frameworks. To return once more to Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, "At stake in every struggle over art there is also the imposition of an art of living, that is, the transmutation of an arbitrary way of living into the legitimate way of life which casts every other way of living into arbitrariness" (qtd. in Sconce, 378). We ought to consider that behind this struggle over queer cinema lies countless different non-normative ways of living that are unbound to traditional interpretations to begin with. Likewise, in all of its queer incomprehensibility, Gregg Araki's body of work simply transcends conventional systems of being defined.

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