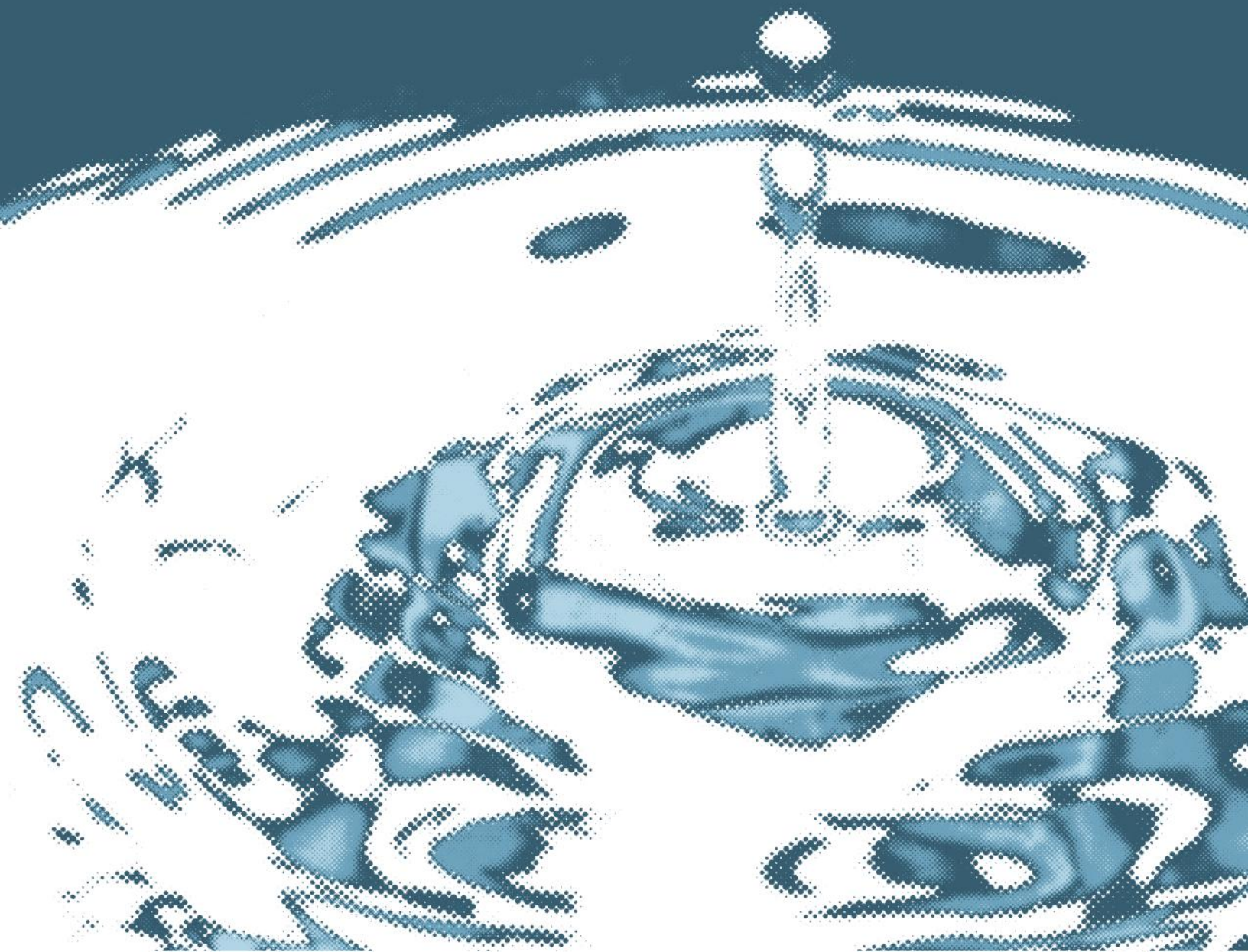


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Looking Beneath the Skin: Reconfiguring Trauma and Sexuality

Evangelos Tziallas

The AIDS epidemic in America brought forth a new wave of gay activism which aggressively fought back at the socio-political system that had repressed queers throughout modern Western history. Previous theoretical writings and activities had approached homosexuality from a more humanistic and assimilatory angle. Queer/AIDS activists such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) and GMHC (Gay Men's Health Crisis), took a much more anti-assimilatory, anti-establishment and deconstructive approach. During the conservative Reagan era, Christian fundamentalists and the popular media constructed gays and lesbians as deviant, threatening and incorrect. Recognizing this hate speech and misleading portrayal, activists and artists took it upon themselves to fight back with political protests, community health clinics, homemade safe sex videos and films/theatre productions which spoke to the gay community.

Looking specifically at cinema, the early 1990s saw an explosion of queer filmmakers making both narratively and aesthetically unconventional films that together formed a counter-cinema. These filmmakers were not interested in pleading with straight culture for acceptance. They made films that exposed the problems of heteronormativity and what results when groups and individuals are oppressed in society. Although this phenomenon was short lived, some of the movement's key figures made films throughout the 1990s and continue to make films today. One key figure is Asian-American director Gregg Araki whose latest work *Mysterious Skin* (2004) is a densely layered film which looks at how the lives of two young boys who were sexually abused as children were shaped by these horrifying events. The film is not only about sexual abuse, but rather a meditation on homosexuality across the spectrum. Unlike the recent Hollywood blockbuster *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Mysterious Skin* is neither a humanist nor an assimilationist movie. New Queer Cinema as a movement may be over, but its ideal of presenting the complexity that is queer culture continues to exist into the present day. I will be focusing on the characters, spaces, aesthetics and dialogue in *Mysterious Skin*, arguing that Araki blurs the socially constructed binary oppositions of bourgeois sexuality, whereby he demonstrates that, like heterosexuality, homosexuality is too complex to be defined by way of physical or social science.

The AIDS crisis brought about a new wave of queer filmmaking whose



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function was to create awareness and a dialogue about AIDS and the gay community. The AIDS crisis had a devastating effect on the queer community starting in the 1970s, continuing into the mid 1980s when it garnered mainstream public attention. Thousands were dying and nothing was being done on a national level in America to properly inform the general public about AIDS or help the queer community (Saalfeld, 1993, p. 21). The media, and in particular, the conservative media, turned AIDS into a deserved plague, meant to wipe out gays and lesbians. Christian fundamentalists and right wing politicians turned AIDS into punishment, and although aimed specifically at gay men, any queer variation including lesbians and transgendered individuals, and especially bisexual men (who were blamed for bringing the “gay disease” into the straight community) felt the repercussions just as intensely. Fed up with misrepresentation and lies, outraged queer communities used film and video to fight back. In his article, “The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous,” Gregg Bordowitz argues that the queer community and queer art comes from the desire to expose and battle against heterosexist oppression and a desire to showcase the workings of that oppression (1993, p. 221). With AIDS activist films and videos, the queer community made its first breakaway from politely asking the heterosexual community for understanding and help. Prior to the AIDS crisis, gay rights movements were vocal, but it was not until tens of thousands of gay men and women began to die that a sense of unity and urgency was created. The Stonewall Riots of 1969 demonstrated antiestablishment politics as Greenwich Village drag queens took to the streets to protest police harassment. This landmark stance against heterosexual tyranny started the gay rights movement; however, AIDS activists recognized that progress requires time, but time was the one thing the gay community did not have. It was the first time the community at large was brought together by devastation and demanded to be heard and to be immediately acknowledged.

Beginning in the 1990s, queer cinema exploded onto the international film scene, playing at international film festivals and winning numerous accolades demonstrating that queer activism and art was making its way into social consciousness. *Poison* (1991) took home the Teddy in 1991 at the Berlin International Film Festival, as well as the grand jury prize at Sundance in 1991. Both *Swoon* (1992) and *Edward II* (1991) took home the Teddy in 1992, and *Edward II*’s female lead, Tilda Swinton, took home the Volpi Cup at the Venice International Film Festival for best actress. This new wave of queer filmmaking was dubbed by B. Ruby Rich as New Queer Cinema. She writes:

All these films contained traces of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social

constructionism very much in mind. Definitively breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive. Above all, they're full of pleasure. (1993, p. 165–166)

Rich believes that this wave of queer cinema was no longer concerned with presenting positive queer images or pleading with the heterosexual community for respect and tolerance. These films were stylized creations meant to break away and defy normative methods of filmmaking. Jose Arroyo writes,

AIDS has affected what amounts to an epistemic shift in gay culture. We know different things about ourselves and we know ourselves differently ... AIDS is why there is New Queer Cinema and it is what New Queer Cinema is about. (2004, p. 92)

Influenced by the defiant style and politics of AIDS activist videos, these artists wanted to give a voice to the queer community. The AIDS epidemic forced the gay community to reconfigure their presence and their representation in society. These films were not meant to construct an image of queerness that was palatable to the heterosexual world. New Queer Cinema was created by queers in order to speak to the common consciousness of the gay community.

Without wanting to over generalize the movement, Michele Aaron proposes four characteristics uniting New Queer Cinema. First, New Queer Cinema is bound together by its defiance. Aaron feels that these films give voice to not only white, bourgeois gays and lesbians, but all the sub-groups that comprise the queer community (2004, p. 4). Some examples include *Paris is Burning* (1991), a film about the African and Hispanic drag community in Harlem, as well as *Tongues Untied* (1989) and *Young Soul Rebels* (1992) which explore black gay male sexuality. The second characteristic is that they are unapologetic about the negative queer characters they portray (p. 4). *Poison*, *The Living End* (1992) and *Swoon* all have scenes of violence and sexuality and are not concerned with heteronormative morality. The third aspect is that they defy the sanctity of the past, especially the homophobic past (*Edward II*), and the fourth distinction is that they all defy cinematic conventions of form, content and genre (p. 4). They are essentially postmodern works where the repressed returns with a vengeance. Although the term postmodern is an elusive theoretical method of perception, I use it in order to demonstrate the

fractured and schizophrenic nature of New Queer Cinema. Both Aaron's characteristics, and Rich's definition, of New Queer Cinema demonstrate the postmodern nature of the movement in that these films are not about following order, they are about disorder. These films are about pastiche, play and deconstruction whereby foundations and beliefs about identity and history are exposed, re-arranged and reconstructed. Although there is a general underlying emotion to these films, there is no one particular stylistic method or narrative that dominates. These radical film makers, like the AIDS activists, want to use their films to alter conventions and popular notions, stir controversy and create a dialogue.

In addition to cultural and cinematic defiance, New Queer Cinema deconstructs heterosexism by looking at what happens when people are repressed and pushed to their limits. As Judith Butler has argued, "Heterosexual privilege operates in many ways, and two ways in which it operates include naturalizing itself and rendering itself as the original and the norm" (1999, p. 339). These films look at how heterosexuality is historically positioned as normal and correct, not only because it is the most commonly accepted sexuality, but because heterosexual culture (frequently in conjunction with religion) has actively repressed homosexuality. Tired of advocating the humanist angle, queer artists fought back by making films about fighting back. New Queer Cinema features numerous characters that actively fight against their oppressors with the same force and violence they have experienced. In Hayne's *Poison* a young boy attacks and kills his abusive father and in Araki's *The Living End*, two HIV positive men go out on one last life binge, including sex, drugs and murder, before their disease kills them. Unlike other films about AIDS, Araki subverts the popular notion of AIDS as a slow countdown to death and instead makes it a liberating experience (Aaron, 2004, p. 5). New Queer Cinema's strength comes from not offering an "alternative" to heterosexual culture, but an additional aspect of sexuality and culture. By fighting against societal norms, these films inherently argue that homosexuality is a part of culture as well as a part of sexuality and not an other. The anxiety over compulsory repression is what New Queer Cinema mediates and critiques.

Although Rich's notion of New Queer Cinema only lasted for a few years, its ideals, goals and filmmakers live on and remain active in the matrix of media and culture. The movement's primary goal was to give a voice to the historically marginalized queer community. In the last 15 years, queer characters and themes have slowly crept their way into mainstream cinema and television. Although it can be argued that the appropriation of "queerness" into the mainstream was done in such a way as to render homosexuality safe, the point remains that representations exist as a result of

New Queer Cinema's impact. Shows like *Will and Grace* (1998) and *Desperate Housewives* (2004), and movies like *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *In and Out* (1997) may be more humanist and safe, but the issues they raise are real. Humanist films are not essentially undesirable, but they are problematic in that they attempt to construct homosexuality in a clichéd, "we are just like you fashion," neglecting that historical and contemporary gay culture is not similar to heterosexual culture. They raise important issues such as repression and discrimination, but they exhibit them in a safe way so as to not offend the heterosexual mainstream. They are designed to create a sense of sympathy for queer individuals, but this sympathy panders to the heterosexual hegemony, in that "gays" are just like "straights," and this is why "we" should allow "them" to exist. These representations can be contrasted with shows like *The L Word* (2004), and *Queer as Folk* (2000), and films such as *Baise-Moi* (2000), *Head On* (1998) and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), which offer a more radical perspective by exhibiting both positive and negative aspects of queer culture and character traits. The characters in these films/shows are not altruistically positive role models that can be held up as opposites to the devoutly hate-filled and negative constructions the Christian right has formed, because they are neither about appeasement nor atonement. Queer characters are no longer de-sexual, non-existent, sad and/or scared people begging for acceptance. Some gay people are good, some are bad; some are flamboyant or butch, some are nice and some are not. It is this meta-culture of representations that New Queer Cinema paved the way for.

Gregg Araki was one of New Queer Cinema's trail blazers and he continues to make radical and controversial films that challenge the status quo and push the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is definable in film and culture. In her article on camp and New Queer Cinema, Glyn Davis argues that Gregg Araki is a camp filmmaker. Although her article was published before *Mysterious Skin*, it provides a good contrast between Araki's previous work and his more contemporary work. She identifies five aspects of "campness" in Araki's films: performance style; the role of trashy ephemera; parody; political aims; and camp intertextuality (2004, p. 60). "Bad performances," or performances that expose themselves as performances are central to both contemporary (*The Living End*, *Doom Generation*) and historical queer cinema (*Trash*, *Heat*, *Flesh*). Araki also makes numerous references to film theory and popular film culture both praising and condemning them at the same time; he respects the past and laughs at it simultaneously. In regards to *Mysterious Skin*, Araki's tone and style changed radically. Many critics praised Araki for his maturity because the film was not trashy or campy; it was a serious, dramatic and well-crafted narrative. David Rooney of *Variety Magazine* writes, "Gregg Araki delivers

his most challenging and arguably most mature film in ‘*Mysterious Skin*’ (May 3, 2004). Many critics believe the film is “mature” because its style is more conventional and its story is more focused and cohesive. At the same time, many critics believe the film is also about child molestation and abuse. Most of these (presumably straight) critics fail to see that the film is not “about” child molestation. These critics lack critical knowledge about queer cinema and because of this lack, they misinterpret the film’s focus and are unable to see how radical the film’s narrative and aesthetics are.

Mysterious Skin tells the story of two young boys who were both molested by the same baseball coach and their subsequent psycho-social-sexual development into adolescence. Neil, who lives at home with his single mother, spends his afternoons as a part-time hustler in his small town and eventually moves to New York with a friend where a dangerous encounter with a trick has him returning home at the end of the film. Brian has become an introvert obsessed with UFOs and suffers from seizures. Unlike Neil, Brian cannot remember his sexual abuse and it is not until the very last scene, when Neil and Brian finally meet up for the first time since they were abused, does Brian discover the truth about what happened to him.

The serious and incredibly taboo themes in *Mysterious Skin* seem to be a plausible explanation for Araki’s aesthetic shift. Although the film has very little to do with child molestation, the narrative is founded on the sexual abuse inflicted on two small children, Brian and Neil. It is possible that Araki as a director has “matured,” but the complexities and spirit of his earlier “immature” work are still alive. Common sense dictates that a film premised on child sex abuse is going to be controversial. For the film to have any relationship with the audience, a more conventional and a less campy aesthetic seems like a more reasonable way to represent the text. Conversely, what makes the film so groundbreaking and controversial is how the material is visually presented. Its lack of humour and lack of trash is what makes the film so radical. Neil’s childhood flashbacks are presented in warm colors, with rich textures and soft lighting, suggesting that his memories of abuse are pleasurable and not traumatic. Had they been shown in an over the top nature, not only would the film be offensive (and some might argue irresponsible), but it would lose its subtle and more transgressive edge. Davis argues that camp has become a growing phenomenon in mainstream culture, which also correlates with the rise of queer media and queer representations in media. Films such as *Legally Blonde* (2001), *Charlie’s Angels* (2000) and *Moulin Rouge* (2001) appropriate gay campness and forge it into a mainstream spectacle (Davis, 2004, p. 59). By rejecting a campy aesthetic and structure, Araki is responding to and rejecting the mainstreaming of queer cinematic conventions. The mainstream has appropriated camp and

queerness, so Araki has appropriated the serious and conventional in order to tell his story.

Although *Mysterious Skin* was made over a decade after the New Queer Cinema wave subsided, and even though Araki's campy and radical style has been subdued, the film still embodies the radical politics and unapologetic representations that define New Queer Cinema. The film is not concerned with providing a humanist approach to homosexuality and it is not interested in providing only positive representations of its characters. The film is not about romantic love, or social acceptance, but about repression and self-exploration. It is a movie about defiance that challenges easy viewing. At the core of this film, like the core of New Queer Cinema, is a deconstruction of queer identity. The film suggests that homosexuality, like heterosexuality, is not an easily definable category. There is no accurate way to represent homosexuality and there is no accurate way to define it. *Mysterious Skin* represents many types of sexualities including, gay, straight, a-sexual, de-sexual, pan-sexual, and even what can constitute perverse sexualities (pedophilia). The film's rich aesthetics also defy how a story based on childhood sexual abuse can or should be told. The film is not interested in providing answers, but raising questions and looking at how gender, sexuality, memory and regional geography all meld together to form different, indefinable identities.

What makes *Mysterious Skin*'s representation of (homo)sexuality so fascinating is that the two main characters' personalities are radically different from each other, despite their similar traumatic experiences. A major question in predominately Western culture is how homosexuality develops. Many conservative thinkers believe that it is a result of childhood trauma, a disorder, or it is a misguided choice. More liberal thinkers suggest that sexuality is not binary but gradient, in that one's sexuality is inherent to who they are and that one's identity is based on who one chooses to be intimate with. This particular view is based more on a scientific/genetic view of sexuality as something inscribed within us. Araki leaves the door wide open in *Mysterious Skin*, suggesting that sexuality is not something that is easily definable, if it is definable at all. By not outright condemning the molestations and by not clearly defining the characters' sexuality and how they develop, Araki argues that sexuality is not something that can be pinpointed or completely understood by way of physical or social science. Sexuality cannot be easily defined as something genetic, or psychological. There is no "homosexual mind," but various histories, cultures and identities grounded in same-sex desire, yet explored through personal pleasure and perceptions.

The ways in which each of the childhood memories are presented function not only narratively, but also as a way to psychologically deconstruct and inspect how trauma and pleasure can be interpreted within different mental frameworks. Each main male character grows up and becomes a very different person who deals with their sexuality in a very different way. Many film critics fall into the conservative rhetoric of the homosexual as the promiscuous lust seeker, believing that Neil's promiscuity is a result of him being sexually abused at a young age. However, many of the critics fail to recognize or contrast this perception with Brian's sexuality and sexual desire being totally repressed. What Araki does not make clear is how much of a role the coach's sexual abuse plays in their sexual development. Each character develops differently and it is this split that makes their sexuality and sexual development impossible to define. Araki uses these two characters to create a dialectic whereby variance is created through frictional opposition. Because the abuse sequences are told in a series of flashbacks, their representations reflect who they are at the present time and how each of them perceives their past. It is impossible to tell whether the abuse is responsible for their development, because their memories are their re-creations and are therefore, like all memories, personal re-creations of the past. This only complicates the relationship between the characters' sexual development and their sexuality.

When the film flashes back to Neil's encounters with his coach, the memories are portrayed as soft, delicate, beautiful, and serene. In the flashback sequences, his voiceover commentary and the music are gentle and sentimental. The music is soft and warm. The visual space is presented like a beautiful dream. The light is bright, the colors are deep and saturated, the editing is noninvasive, the camera framing is wide and open giving the *mise-en-scène* an almost picturesque quality. The sequence in which the coach dumps a box of cereal on Neil's head is presented in slow motion, with the multi-coloured cereal slowly showering Neil as he looks up and smiles as if a rainbow is showering down on him. The coach's house is also full of toys and candy transforming it from an average single male's home into a child's wonderland. According to Neil, he was the coach's favourite and the coach truly cared for him because he gave him "love" and attention. Since Neil lacked a father figure, the coach became a surrogate father explaining why he felt loved by the coach and why he enjoyed the attention. The audience also discovers that Neil once watched his mother perform oral sex on a very rugged man, and that Neil fetishizes ultra-masculine men. The film dares to break the social taboo about child sexuality and suggests is that Neil was gay and sexual at a young age, which means that in some way, he may have enjoyed the sexual gratification he received from his coach. Later on in the film, his friend Eric discovers pictures of Neil with the coach's fingers in his

mouth and an audiotape the coach made. Neil still values and cherishes these intimate moments with his coach and misses how he felt when he was with his coach. The film does not clarify whether Neil was and continues to be a victim or whether there was a bond between him and his coach that cannot be captured in mainstream perceptions of abuse relationships or whether it is both. Araki's refusal to define Neil and the coach's relationship as solely one-dimensional, mirrors his refusal to define how homosexuality develops and what constitutes proper sexual desire.

With respect to Neil, Araki plays with the notion of desire and what constitutes pleasure, which reflects the ambiguous nature of sexuality. Desire, and in particular sexual desire, is not always "correct" and does not always follow proper social norms. One need only look at the variety of pornography available to realize that sexual desire can feed into fantasies of masochism, sadism and other social taboos such as rape, incest, humiliation, and human excrement. Araki acknowledges the existence of childhood sexuality and dares to diffuse the boundaries of what constitutes victimization and the possible pleasure of subordination. This oscillation between pleasure and pain, memory and trauma, becomes an additional layer in Araki's construction of sexuality and sexual orientation.

Brian's flashbacks are radically different from Neil's, demonstrating that for him the memories are not pleasurable and are in fact responsible for his repressed sexuality. Brian's flashbacks (pre-abuse) are presented in a very fragmented and mystic style. The *mise-en-scène* is dark and foggy and when Brian speaks, his voice almost quivers with fear. While Neil remembers the molestations as something positive and beautiful, Brian cannot even begin to fathom them and has to repress his sexual energies and his memories. Brian does not remember being molested by his coach. He has suppressed these memories and the majority of his adolescent years have been spent trying to figure out what happened to him as a child. The only feasible explanation he can come up with is that he was abducted at an early age by aliens. This explains why he cannot remember the five hours after his baseball match, and it also explains why his nose bleeds when he tries to remember that evening. The nose bleeds are a physical reaction and visual manifestation of his emotional trauma. Brian's repressed memories have manifested into fantastical explanations, which have become obsessions. These obsessions allow Brian to distance himself from his past, while simultaneously allowing him to be part of the exploration giving him a sense of agency and control.

Araki plays with Brian's childhood sexuality as a deterministic precursor to his development into adolescence. In an attempt to discover his past, Brian keeps a diary of his dreams and even contacts another woman

(Evelyn) who claims she was also abducted by aliens. When this woman becomes a friend, she makes sexual advances towards Brian, which he instantly rejects. Although he is presented as a somewhat a-sexual character, it is not until this moment where he actually rejects sex. Though Brian's sexuality remains uncertain at the end of the film, it is evident that his sexual repression is directly tied to the repression of the sexual abuse he suffered. At one point in the film, Brian sticks his hand into a cow's carcass and then has a quick flashback and faints. It is not until the end of the film that he realizes that when he was a child he was forced to anally fist his coach, which explains his reaction when he inserted his hand into the dead animal's corpse. As a child, Brian cannot play sports and is favored by his mother and rejected by his father. This could be an indication of early homosexual development whereby he symbolically aligns himself with femininity, but Araki does not provide enough textual evidence for a conclusive answer. Araki plays with social stigmas and pop-psychology and the problematic nature of how gender and sexual identity develop and relate to each other. Thus, Araki suggests that early childhood experiences have an effect on sexual development but they do not determine one's sexual orientation.

Related to the narrative ambiguity of the text, the film's genre-hybridity both reflects New Queer Cinema's style and demonstrates that sexuality is not something that can be easily categorized. The film's fractured story and diverse visual representations resonate from the stylistic developments employed by New Queer Cinema films. *Poison*, for example, stitches together three different, but thematically connected, narratives. Each of these narratives is styled after different genres and employs different aesthetics, which include documentary, science fiction and pseudo-surreal jail/boarding-school drama. In *Mysterious Skin*, the genre crossbreeding is an example of the postmodern model in which Araki frames the story. By breaking and melding the boundaries of genre he not only exposes the problems of genre categorization, but also uses this method of framing to stylistically reflect the problem of sexual categorization. One genre cannot accurately and completely represent the characters and situations that it seeks to contain. By opening the boundaries and by not sticking to just one genre, the film shows how the characters and in particular, their sexualities, are not easily definable. Neil is the emotionless hustler whose story is linked to drama, sub-culture and coming-of-age filmic conventions, while Brian is the detective who lives within the world of science fiction. Each character is not only different, but their complex life and past is seen and constructed through different genres and perspectives.

The inability to define or stabilize sexual identity is further articulated by the various representations of masculinity in the film. In Steve Neale's

article, "Masculinity as Spectacle," he argues that the notion of masculinity is equated with heterosexuality (1992, p. 277). This gender formation is inscribed into the social psyche through various mechanisms, and that inherent within this system is a set of pressures and contradictions (Neale, 1992, p. 277). If we understand gender to be a societal construct, constant reinforcement is necessary in order to maintain that construct. Along with heterosexuality comes proper gender definition and engendered power relations whereby masculinity has been historically constructed as superior, while femininity has been historically defined as inferior or subordinate. Masculinity is therefore presented and idealized in society in order to maintain its dominance. Any deviance from this notion is subject to criticism or worse. Araki is critical of masculinity and the belief that it is heterosexually inclusive, in that queers are feminine and "real" men are masculine. Neil's physical and vocal mannerisms are ostensibly "straight" even though he is a self-identified and sexually active queer. Neil actually prefers stereotypical, masculine figures as sexual partners. In the beginning of the film, Neil masturbates as he watches his mother perform fellatio on her new boyfriend. As the boyfriend comes close to having an orgasm, the voice-over informs the audience that Neil receives pleasure from seeing tough men turn into fragile, helpless figures. Araki breaks down traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity, suggesting that they are not polar opposites and that masculinity is to some extent a type of performance. Butler maintains that gender is a "performance" and that drag or androgyny expose gender construction and denaturalize gender and engendered power relations (1999, p. 341). The first time Neil sees his coach he mentally conceives of him as a cowboy or fireman. Neil fetishizes these popular notions of heterosexual masculinity and in a later sequence he rejects a possible partner because he is too feminine. This demonstrates how masculinity is upheld in both queer and straight contexts, but that there is no unified queer desire. Neil's sexual preference for masculine men exposes that gay desire is partly based on homophobic heterosexism. Neil's friend Eric is a feminine queer who is essentially de-sexualized throughout the film. He never speaks about sex and has no other relationships besides Neil and Wendy. Although more overtly enacting feminine tropes, he lacks any sort of sex appeal and energy, which disrupts both the natural link between gender and sex, and homosexuality and masculinity. On a narrative level, Neil's desire for macho men may be linked to his desire to find the paternal figure that was absent throughout his life. Neil privileges masculinity and not only identifies with these conceptions but constructs and projects himself as that image. On a thematic level, the film deconstructs the notion of masculinity, suggesting that these machismo representations are neither natural, nor exclusively straight. Being gay is not necessarily linked to femininity and being straight is not founded on being masculine. Rather masculinity is a set

of inscribed and conjoined derivatives that have been heavily “normalized” by heteronormative culture.

The representation of queer identities and lifestyles within different regional contexts only further complicates the ability to classify homosexuality as stable or homogeneous. In her article “The Brandon Teena Archive,” Judith Halberstam argues that “most theories of homosexuality within the twentieth century assume that gay culture is rooted in cities” (2003, p. 162). Popular notions of homosexuality focus mostly on, and therefore idealize, urban gay identities. Rarely are small town and rural queer identities represented in cinema and television. In *Mysterious Skin*, queer culture and identities in both small town and urban settings are explored. Both Brian and Neil live in Hutchinson, a small mid-western town. Brian’s home space is almost suffocating which, within the film’s context, comes to represent his repressed sexuality. Neil, on the other hand, is openly gay, and as a way to be both sexually active and financially independent, becomes an underground hustler. On a narrative level the film contrasts the different lifestyles indicating that not only does homosexuality exist in small towns, but that it is both an oppressed and integral part of the community. Neil sleeps with numerous closeted, older men suggesting that homosexuality is, in some respect, closeted in non-urban communities and in another respect, simply less vocal. This is best demonstrated by Neil’s impersonal advertisement on a bathroom wall. Anonymity within the public sphere has been a cornerstone of contemporary queer culture whereby sex in public urban spaces (parks and public bathrooms being the most infamous) had become sites of opposition to heterosexual oppression. The bathroom becomes a site for underground communication, whereby the straight world simply ignores these scribes as vacuous graffiti. The bathroom, as a symbol of both the abject and the perfect mixture of both public and private, is re-articulated within the film’s context to demonstrate the connected (if disjointed) nature of queer culture. Queer individuals and cultures exist outside of urban centers, but they function and look different than their urban counterparts.

The film not only shows queer identities and cultures existing in small towns, but also suggests that although less obvious, these identities may be superior to urban queer culture. The town’s scenery is almost always presented with saturated colors and warm lighting, suggesting the space is both kind and safe. Neil’s clients and partners treat him well, pay him and give him pleasure. One of his clients even warns him to use protection and to be careful. Although he is a teenage prostitute he is never in any immediate danger. The *mise-en-scène* and the viewers’ glimpse into the sex trade imply that queer culture is kept quiet in small towns, and it is this silence that

produces a mutual respect between partners to keep their activities private. By contrast, when Neil moves to New York, the urban metropolis is presented as a dark, impersonal, unknowable space. Neil's New York clients are aggressive, demanding, sometimes violent and always receivers of pleasure. Neil's naïvety is exposed by his first urban client, who asks to be anally penetrated. Neil goes to perform this act and is stopped by the client who asks Neil if he is stupid; Neil did not bother to put on a condom. The early 1990s setting of Neil's life in New York is an additional way Araki pays homage to New Queer Cinema. In his small town, Neil is unaware of the AIDS epidemic signaling the lack of awareness outside urban centres. Safe sex practices did not penetrate "middle America" and AIDS as a gay/urban disease remained the popular perception. Neil is eventually exposed to the devastating effects of AIDS when an infected old man covered in lesions, purchases his services and asks that Neil gently rub his back. This tender and heartbreaking moment is a visual reminder of how AIDS ravaged the gay community and how it continues to disproportionately affect gay men. Although urban queers are able to be more open about their sexuality, the film shows that the power of freedom comes with the possibility of devastating consequences. Yet alternatively, the film also recognizes that silence is also a problem as this was the way the childhood abuse was able to transpire. ACT UP's popular motto, "Silence = Death" is injected into the small town where silence is the norm, suggesting that silence, although functional, has its consequences as well.

In *Mysterious Skin*, the theoretical aspect of New Queer Cinema's relationship between queerness and violence is explored, indicating that violence is still a part of queer culture, but that it is no longer straight versus queer or vice versa. Films such as *Edward II*, *Poison*, *Swoon* and Araki's *The Living End* either featured scenes of violence or were based on their characters being violent in a straight/queer dialectic. Violence was used to demonstrate oppression over deviant sexual behaviors, or fighting back against oppression. In *Mysterious Skin* the use of violence signals a shift in the cultural positioning of queers because it is neither heteronormative culture oppressing queer identities, nor is it queer individuals fighting against oppression. Instead, violence is represented as something that is part of queer culture; it is queer-on-queer violence. Although seemingly conservative, within the context of the film, Araki's position on violence is actually liberal. It exposes violence in the queer community and disrupts the image of queers as professional victims who live together in harmony. Child molesters exist in both the gay and straight community, as do rapists. The film suggests that queer communities are no longer segregated communities that can be easily identifiable, but are now an integral part of society and have similar problems as other communities.

The most visually disturbing scene in the film occurs near the end of the film when Neil's last client forces him to take drugs and subsequently rapes him in the shower while beating him over the head with a bottle of shampoo. Araki recognizes the history of violence that queers have dealt with and he also recognizes that this form of pain has been transferred into pleasure, and in particular, sexual pleasure within queer sexual fantasy. However, this sequence suggests that fantasy is based in reality and in reality, actions have consequences. This sequence can be interpreted as a form of punishment for sexual deviance, however, it is more about the return of the repressed whereby Neil must now revisit and re-evaluate his experience of abuse. This sequence of sexual violence is thematically linked to Neil's earlier experience of sexual abuse, whereby the childhood abuse is now graphically visualized. The drugs Neil is forced to consume are symbolically linked to the candy and video games the coach made available to Neil, and Neil's perception of sexual pleasure is reconfigured, questioning the sadomasochistic relationship he has with his past. Araki recognizes the existence of childhood sexuality. However, he raises the issue of responsibility. Sexuality and sexual pleasure are not always proper; however, sexual practice differs from fantasy in that practice requires consent, and consent comes from those who are mentally able to consent and responsibly deal with the consequences of their desire. After Neil is raped, he sits in a subway car, bruised and covered in blood. The sterile fluorescent lighting in this long take becomes the antithesis to the saturated colours of Neil's memories, connoting an emotional change. This sequence narratively sets up the final meeting between Neil and Brian, where Neil must now confront his past and is forced to communicate the events that transpired to Brian.

The closing sequence refuses to provide conclusive answers about the future of the characters or about the future of their sexual identification. When Brian confronts Neil, the two boys break into their coach's old home while the new family that inhabits that space is out for the evening. Brian eventually discovers that the coach molested him and that Neil helped the coach. After the abuse, Brian fainted and fell face first into the ground causing his nose to bleed. As Neil retells the story, Brian begins to shake and his nose begins to bleed once again. Brian, like Neil, is being forced to confront his repressed memories and sexuality. In the final shot of the film, the camera captures Brian crying and curled up into Neil's lap from a bird's-eye-view and slowly tracks back up into the sky. Neil's voiceover states that he wants to apologize to Brian for what happened and that he wishes he could escape the world like the angels do. The surreal style of the final shot captures the boys sitting on the couch, surrounded by darkness that seems to trap them together in that space. Dennis Lim from *The Village Voice* writes, "Fittingly, the ending, which crescendos to a dizzying moment of mutual

reckoning, offers catharsis but not escape” (“The Lost Boys,” May 3, 2003). Had this been a Hollywood film, additional sequences would have followed showing the boys getting over their trauma and living happy, productive lives. Araki chooses to end the film with the boys still trapped in that dark space, leaving the ending open and not informing the audience as to what will happen next. This is the final way in which the film refuses to conclusively define sexuality. The audience will never know if Brian is gay or straight, and they will never know if Neil will ever develop emotional attachments to other people or Brian will develop sexual attachments to others. Araki recognizes that emotion in relation to sexuality is important because it is a way to connect with people on a less superficial and more powerful level. Sex is only a gateway to sexuality, and since sexuality is grounded in emotion, both Brian and Neil (who are emotionally repressed) lack the ability to explore the full potential of their sexuality.

The early 1990s saw an explosion of queer cinema that broke away from traditional methods of storytelling. These films did not hide or code their characters’ sexuality and were not concerned with telling conventional Hollywood stories with conventional Hollywood aesthetics. These films were aggressive, controversial, energetic and not concerned with presenting queer culture and identities as positive. Although this wave subsided, aspects of its spirit broke through into the mainstream. Contemporary mainstream films and television shows feature both queer characters and queer themes, and there are now entire shows and films about queer culture. Gregg Araki was a member of the New Queer Cinema movement and continues to make films in the present day. His newest film *Mysterious Skin* carries on the ideals of New Queer Cinema by presenting controversial themes and characters in an unapologetic fashion. The narrative revolves around two teenagers who were sexually abused as children. However, on a deeper level, Araki’s film both inspects and dissects popular notions of sexuality. The stereotypical homosexual is an effeminate, skinny, clean man who happily swishes around the big city. Araki argues against this portrait by providing a broad representation of sexuality and its relation to gender, gender performativity, personal history, and geographical location. In the same way that straight people look, think, act, dress and live differently, one’s sexuality does not instantly place them into a defined category.

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