Unfortunately, the mystery largely remains

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Mysterious Skin*, written and directed by Gregg Araki, based on a novel by Scott Heim*

Mysterious Skin is the latest film by Gregg Araki, an American independent filmmaker often identified with radical gay cinema. Araki came to prominence with three movies that were considered landmarks in "New Queer Cinema," a term coined by the media in the early 1990s for low-budget, gay-themed movies. The director professes an interest rather in "polymorphous sexuality."

Araki summarizes these early films, which he refers to as his "teen apocalypse trilogy," as depictions of "the chaotic violent world of teens, where bad things happen unexpectedly."

That bad things happen in an Araki film is an understatement. *Totally F***ed Up* (1993) is the story of teenage angst and suicide. *The Doom Generation*'s (1995) contains a brutal, if cartoonish, scene of rape and castration (heads and limbs are also blown apart in graphic detail) and the bloody finale of *Nowhere* (1997) features a character being transformed into a giant cockroach.

Although Araki abandons some of his trademark outrageousness in *Mysterious Skin* and considers this a more "mainstream" project, the movie nevertheless still tends toward the sexually and emotionally extreme, and not in particularly enlightening or useful ways. Based on a 1995 novel by Scott Heim, *Mysterious Skin* focuses on two Kansas adolescents, the victims of sexual molestation, and the parallel stories of how they process the experience.

"The summer I was eight years old, five hours disappeared from my life. Five hours, lost, gone without a trace," says Brian (Brady Corbet). A decade after the rape, he explains the time lapse, as well as his frequent nosebleeds and fainting spells, as the work of alien abductors. Emotionally disfigured, he develops a quirky relationship with Avalyn (Mary Lynn Rajskub), a teenage alien abduction theorist who is probably also repressing memories of abuse.

On the other hand, Neil (Joseph Gordon Levitt) not only remembers his molestation but thinks he was in love with his victimizer—the boys' Little League coach (Bill Sage). His consciously chosen career, prostitution, allows him to exalt in the sexual power he exerts over the older men who pay for his services.

Neil has a reasonable support system that includes a loving, hip, but promiscuous mother (Elisabeth Shue) and a female "soul mate," Wendy (Michelle Trachtenberg). He is cold to the more normal love offered him by his best friend Eric. Both Wendy and Eric fear the dangers attendant to Neil's profession. "Where normal people have a heart, Neil McCormick has a bottomless black hole," says Wendy, after one of her many lectures on the deadly risks of unsafe sex.

In their separate worlds, Brian and Neil exist as emotional lepers. As the film progresses, Brian develops a compulsion to uncover the truth about his childhood that leads him to a life-changing encounter with Neil. When the latter reveals the horrific details of their shared abuse, recovery becomes a possibility.

Araki has a talent for directing actors and at its best, the film exhibits moments of real sensitivity. Neil and Brian are affecting, as are Neil's mother (Shue), Wendy, Avalyn and Eric. Performances are enhanced by an intelligent musical score and adept cinematography. But the emotional energy generated is truncated and marred by the film's relative flatness. More serious is the fact that the movie registers its observations with sexually manipulative and violent imagery. In short, not much happens dramatically except when the film pumps up on gratuitous shock-tactics.

In justifying this distasteful aspect of *Mysterious Skin*, Araki states: "I want the film to let people go through what these boys went through and feel their suffering. I want to give people something to think about." The question is: what induces people to think? Making an audience squirm at provocative sex has nothing necessarily to do with encouraging thought. It's a peculiar form of preaching to the choir, which tends to reinforce the viewer's existing prejudices. One walks out of the theater with as little or as much insight into child abuse—and sexual orientation—as when one sat down to watch the film.

Araki's limited but belligerent presentation of sex does not, contrary to his opinion, make the director a forthright, sex pioneer. The increasing repression faced by homosexuals is a legitimate subject for artistic treatment. To ask how far explicit sex and pointless exoticism advances

this struggle does not imply a prudish adaptation to hypocritical, bourgeois mores. *Mysterious Skin*'s innumerable, graphic sex scenes between Neil and his clients are unnecessary. They are clearly a substitute for dealing in a more substantial way with the film's central theme—the variegated repercussions of pedophilic sexual abuse.

Furthermore, the film's treatment of this sensitive topic borders not only on pornography, but sadism. In an interview with suicidegirls.com, Araki reveals that Neil's move to New York was calculated solely as a plot device to augment the level of danger involved in his prostitution. In small-town Kansas, Neil maxes out on clients—all average "Joes." New York City offers far more varied and exotic encounters, culminating in Neil's vicious rape by a deranged psycho from Brighton Beach. This last is a repulsive scene suggesting an alarming degree of insensitivity and indifference on the part of the film's creators. Such depictions of torture, whatever the director's intentions, emanate from a general process of brutalization in the culture and have the effect of further inuring the population to suffering.

This raises the problem of how an artist is to oppose a profoundly antidemocratic and anti-gay administration in Washington. Araki's cinematic equivalent of shouting angrily at the top of his lungs and ripping off everyone's clothes could not be less effective. It has all of the impact of streaking in front of the White House. American culture is awash with artists who specialize in this type of criticism, which is not criticism at all. Such antics are essentially the "left-wing" of media sensationalism and tabloidism. Lurking underneath is a demoralized attitude that anti-gay bias is persuasive and cannot be successful challenged. In a statement that exudes more than a whiff of revenge, Araki told RadioFree.com: "My goal with the movie is to devastate people."

Araki has missed an opportunity to delve into what is only hinted at in *Mysterious Skin*: a dead-end society, where in the forgotten towns and impersonal cities, loneliness and alienation—and sexual dysfunction—are widespread. More could have been made of Neil's mother, a good-hearted, but lost and desperate soul. One only catches glimpses of Brian's family, whose Betty Crocker mom is oblivious to her son's classic symptoms of sexual abuse, writ large as a billboard. A state of acute denial persists as her family implodes. Attempting to unveil the social circumstances responsible for this misery would have yielded a more enduring work. The movie's timeframe is referred to rather than shown dramatically—the film's timelessness is part of the same lack of interest in concrete conditions.

In several interviews, Araki states that child abuse has become a cliché. Despite massive attention paid to the problem by the media, with three-ring circuses like the Michael Jackson trial, and television programs, such as "Law and Order," there exists no empathy or understanding within the general population, according to the director. This is no doubt true.

Child abuse is a social problem. It has been reduced to a cliché in a cinema and media that can only explain any dysfunction in society as originating in individual neurosis or "evil." The pedophile is a monster, non-human—full stop. Complexities of life are boiled down to individual psychic experiences. How far outside this orbit is Araki? Although he introduces certain ambiguities—i.e., whether Neil's sexual orientation is innate or conditioned—Araki adopts the same general template.

Tragedies such as child abuse are real tragedies. But it is necessary to explain the role the present state of society plays in making them possible. There is nothing anti-establishment or original about this outlook in the accepted formula that individual traumas in childhood, rather than a social order at the end of its rope, create the world's problems.

That there is an audience for this line of reasoning is underscored by the wide critical acclaim heaped on the film. The fact that many reviewers warn that *Mysterious Skin* is not for the faint of heart does not stop them, in many cases, from issuing hearty recommendations. To please this crowd, the artist cannot divert far enough away from the more challenging task of social analysis—even if it means crossing the boundary between art and pornography. By uncritically projecting on screen their own confusions, filmmakers like Araki end up, with works such as *Mysterious Skin*, encouraging retrograde fascinations.