

I Saw the TV Glow: A life unfulfilled

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I Saw the TV Glow (written and directed by US filmmaker Jane Schoenbrun) is a cloudy, enigmatic, occasionally disturbing work. Ostensibly a “horror” film, its unsettling elements are derived from a depiction, however oblique, of the effects of social alienation.

The film opens on US election day in 1996 with the meeting of two lonely and socially isolated teenagers, Owen (played by Ian Foreman in the early scenes and Justice Smith for the bulk of the film) and Maddy (Brigitte Lundy-Paine). They bond over their shared interest in a fictional television show, *The Pink Opaque*, about two teenage girls with supernatural psychic abilities who battle the villainous “Mr. Melancholy.”

Owen’s parents forbid him to watch the show, which his father insists is “for girls.” Owen watches it in secret anyway, while spending the night at Maddy’s house. For Maddy, the show is a refuge from an unhappy home life with a violent and abusive stepfather. As she puts it, “Sometimes *The Pink Opaque* feels more real than real life.”

Maddy confides to Owen that she plans to run away from home, and she asks him to join her. However, before they can carry through the plan, Owen becomes overwhelmed by the fear of leaving home and backs out. Within a few weeks, Owen’s mother dies and Maddy disappears. Shortly afterward, *The Pink Opaque* is canceled.

Years later, Owen, now a young man living with his stern and distant father, works a monotonous job at a movie theater. Maddy approaches him out of the blue, while he is out grocery shopping. She tells him a fantastical story, that she has been living for eight years inside the world of *The Pink Opaque*, having been transported there after burying herself alive. She insists that the life Owen is living is a false one, in a “pocket universe” contrived by Mr. Melancholy. She asks him

to examine his memories. Flashbacks reveal that certain events Owen had thought were scenes from the show were in fact his own repressed memories of experimenting with his gender identity.

She asks him to bury himself as well, thereby transporting into the world of the show and escaping his false reality. “The longer you wait,” she warns, “the closer you get to suffocating.” Owen begins to join her, but he runs away, just as he had years earlier. He never sees Maddy again.

Decades pass. Owen is an elderly man working at a “Fun Center” of children’s arcade games. He insists, not very convincingly, that he made the correct choice to become a man and “a productive member of society.” He watches old episodes of *The Pink Opaque* on a streaming platform and is embarrassed by the cheap effects and childish storylines. Still, a deep desperation, a sense that his life has been misspent, eats at him.

During a birthday party at the children’s arcade, Owen breaks down, screaming that he is dying, but the people around him don’t appear to notice. His only relief comes from locking himself in the bathroom and cutting open his chest, revealing glowing television static within. Leaving the bathroom, he apologizes for his outburst to everyone he passes. No one seems to hear him.

Writer-director Schoenbrun has commented that the film is intended as an allegory for the experience of transgender individuals. While this is never explicitly stated, a number of the elements are in line with this perspective, including Owen’s repressed memories of gender experimentation, his strained relationship with his father and his fixation on the female characters of *The Pink Opaque*. Even the latter title seems a reference to Owen’s cloudy understanding of his inner world.

Still, there are larger implications embedded in the

film, whether intentional or not. The feelings communicated here will likely be familiar to many young people of Owen and Maddy's generation: the suffocating alienation, the sense that one's life is "false," the repression of deep inner feelings, the thwarted desire for connection. The central "horror" of the story is the tragedy of a life unfulfilled.

During one scene, Maddy describes the "slow death" she experiences as a young person without any particular prospects for a better life:

I got a job at the mall, at Build-A-Bear. Filling the dolls up with stuffing ... But something was still wrong. Wronger, even. Time wasn't right. It was moving too fast. And then I was 19. And then I was 20. I felt like one of those dolls, asleep in the supermarket. Stuffed. And then I was 21. Like chapters skipped over on a DVD. I told myself, "This isn't normal." This isn't how life is supposed to be. I thought about running away again, about moving to Santa Fe and changing my name one more time. But I knew that everywhere would be just the same.

Certain unusual images stick in one's mind, and certain moments. As a whole, however, *I Saw the TV Glow* itself is unsatisfying.

In the first place, the ambiguity—or opaqueness—of the storytelling detracts from its impact. Schoenbrun has expressed an admiration for the work of David Lynch, especially his *Twin Peaks*, and that seems to be a touchstone here. Charlie Kaufman's *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* may be another. Schoenbrun doesn't seem as cynical as Lynch or as self-absorbed as Kaufman; *I Saw the TV Glow* appears genuinely motivated by sympathy for quiet suffering.

But the self-consciously murky approach is an evasion from the hard work of identifying the real sources of social wretchedness, whether for transgender individuals or anyone else. Insofar as any solutions to Owen's predicament are identified, they are entirely individualistic, and pretty banal. He simply needs the courage to throw off convention and "live authentically," etc.

Schoenbrun (born 1987) belongs to a generation that came of age during a period of cultural and social reaction, worsening prospects for wide layers of the population, massive social inequality, intensifying global economic and geopolitical instability and the artificial suppression of the class struggle by the trade unions. A vast political, ideological vacuum makes itself felt in various ways.

I Saw the TV Glow communicates something of the widespread social misery affecting young workers in particular—dead-end jobs, low wages, the lack of a future, official indifference and callousness.

Yet, by and large, a passivity still pervades the artists of this generation, an inability to identify *social* solutions to great problems, a skepticism about the very possibility of social progress fought for and achieved by masses of people.

Postmodernism, identity politics, the race and gender obsession in the academies have played their collective role, promoting irrationalism, individualism and even middle-class selfishness as "progressive" virtues. These pressures weigh on the artists, even on those who don't subscribe to every one of the current "identity" nostrums. The latter tend to be accepted, half-consciously, as "givens" and seep into the work.

Young people must have a future, all of them, including transgender individuals and other oppressed groups. But it lies in a struggle against what exists, the capitalist status quo, in all its dimensions. What social force can carry out such a struggle successfully?

Taking into account and orienting their artistic efforts toward the developing movement of the working class, and the great social and historical questions bound up with it, would have a clarifying and galvanizing effect on young filmmakers like Schoenbrun.



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