



Araki, Gregg (b. 1959)

by Richard C. Bartone

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Gregg Araki's films are direct responses to the "institutionalized homophobia" of media, politicians, and cultural watchdogs. The poster boy of radical and militant queer cinema, Araki disdains the ghettoizing label of "gay filmmaker" and denies being part of the New Queer Cinema.

Frequently accused of displaying negative images of homosexuals, Araki has no tolerance for insular lesbian and gay organizations, and refuses to be a propagandist for any gay agenda. Aggressively skirting labels and appropriation by others, Araki's polemical, queer films explore polymorphous perversity, amorphous and pan-sexuality, omni-sexual behavior, AIDS, and the modern ménage à trois.

Born to Japanese-American parents in Los Angeles in 1959, Araki grew up in Santa Barbara. After graduating from the University of California, Santa Barbara with a B.A. in film history and criticism in 1982, Araki completed an M.F.A. in film production at the University of Southern California. Studying film history, he developed a love for screwball comedies, and their irrational, subversive narratives, as well as for road movies and Jean Luc Godard, a French New Wave filmmaker who regularly broke filmic codes.

Scripting, photographing, editing, and producing his first four films, Araki polished the art of being a guerrilla filmmaker: someone who freely and spontaneously films anywhere and anytime with rudimentary equipment. He constantly dodged Los Angeles police in the streets for failing to have a shooting permit.

During this period, punk and post-punk music was as important to Araki's films as growing up gay in Los Angeles. He embraced the "spirit" of punk rock's intensity, anarchy, and anger, its unrefined confrontational style, and hyper-exaggerated performances.

Araki's early films are crude in production values and contentious. They attack Hollywood's conservative ideology as a "stagnant cesspool of conformity."

Made in 1989, *The Long Weekend (O' Despair)*, "a minimalistic gay/bisexual post punk antithesis to the smug complacency of regressive Hollywood tripe like *The Big Chill* (1983)," depicts the futile attempts of three couples to disentangle their lives. Their polymorphous sexuality becomes the source of confusion, distress, uncertainty, and depression. The gay press did not greet the film warmly.

With *The Living End* (1991), subtitled "An Irresponsible Film," critics associated Araki with the New Queer Cinema because its release coincided with other alternative gay films. In *The Living End*, two HIV-positive men, one anti-social and on the brink of lashing out at the world and the other a reserved film critic, fall in love and go on the run after accidentally killing a policeman. Referred to as the gay *Thelma and Louise* (1991), the film depicts how the reckless and irresponsible men clash with a homophobic society and themselves. Araki made *The Living End* in opposition to what he considered the sentimental, "positive gay imagery" of *Longtime Companion* (1990).

After reading about the high rate of teenage suicide, and intrigued by the intensity of teen life, Araki began

a "teen apocalypse trilogy," beginning with *Totally F***ed Up* (1993), subtitled "Another Homo Movie," followed by *The Doom Generation* (1994), and concluding with *Nowhere* (1997). The films focus on teenagers struggling with identity, sexuality, doubt, bitterness, and social torment in an irrational world.

Critics called the trilogy nihilistic, but the films are deeply romantic, and the characters desperately believe in ideal love. But in their naivete, the characters are blind to the ways in which an inhospitable world shatters romance. In all three films, Araki saturates images with bright red, orange, and green light, heightening romanticism while conveying a surreal environment. The trilogy reveals Araki's fascination with the oppressiveness of popular culture.

Central to Araki's queer aesthetic are extreme and unpredictable shifts in relationships and moods, from comic to tragic, sensitive to torturous. In *The Doom Generation*, subtitled "A Heterosexual Movie," and an attempt at a "purely queer" film sexually appealing to straights and gays alike, exaggerated and comic-book violence distances viewers from a vicious society until realistic and horrific violent acts end the film. Critics walked out of screenings, and audiences, not prepared for the ending, left in shock.

The queerest event in Araki's career intertwined film and real life. While filming *Nowhere*, Araki's "*Beverly Hills 90210* set in hell," he became romantically involved with one of his actresses, Kathleen Robinson, who played Claire on the television series. *Variety* announced that the relationship "has tongues wagging," and another headline read "Gay filmmaker falls for 90210 babe."

The relationship led to a film Araki wrote for Robinson, *Splendor* (1999), an optimistic and glamorous screwball comedy with queer undertones that aims for a wider audience while remaining on Hollywood's fringe.

In the Summer of 2000, Araki completed a pilot episode for the series *This is How the World Ends* for MTV. Described by Araki as "Twin Peaks for the MTV generation," he was pleased that a truly radical program might enter millions of homes. MTV referred to it as "Dawson's Creek on acid," and announced that the series from "one-time homosexual" Araki would debut in Fall 2000. It has yet to be shown. Before MTV silently abandoned the series, Araki had explained why it would never air: "If we ever did manage to get the show on the air, it would change the face of broadcast TV."

After two successful screenings at the Venice Film Festival and London Film Festival in fall 2004, *Mysterious Skin*, based on Scott Heim's novel of the same title, was finally released in the U.S. in spring 2005. In the film, Araki uses the "normal" setting of Hutchinson, Kansas to enter the "dark and dangerous world" of adolescent sexuality when a baseball coach's sexual abuse of two eight-year-old team members sparks two different journeys through late adolescence, and two radically different outcomes. When one boy embraces the coach's advances, Araki questions the accepted "evil" image of a pedophile in a disturbing manner; viewers are confronted by a pedophile who elicits contradictory and unsettling emotional responses.

Araki's next project, *crEEEEps*, is set in Malibu beach and combines two genres present in his early films, the horror film and teenage sex comedy.

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