

**If I Stand on All Fours, Am I a Table?:
Doing Gender, Queer Temporalities, and Seeing the TV Glow**

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CAST 207: Introduction to Queer Studies

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November 23, 2024

Each of us spends every day performing the acts we've learned from the days behind us. We perform at work and at school, on the stage and on the internet. We will all spend our lives acting on the thoughts and behaviors we've learned to categorize as "right" and "wrong," "natural" and "unnatural;" each day picking and choosing the pieces of ourselves that we want to present to the world. The concept of gender has existed since humans made words to define it, and since then, the social descriptions of it have ebbed and flowed in leniency and strictness through generations. In her work "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," (Butler, 1988) Judith Butler discusses the legacy of gender norms and performances, opening the floor to a conversation of why we call ourselves the things we do and what it means to do gender. Much of the piece directly speaks to many of the nuances of the 2024 film *I Saw The TV Glow* (Schoenbrun, 2024). A movie that has, as we all somewhat expected, gone over many people's heads.

I Saw the TV Glow garnered subpar, and some even hateful, audience and critic reviews, effortlessly portraying cisnet audiences' difficulty accepting that not all media is made with cisnet viewers in mind. With its glaring color schemes, fourth wall breaks, pinpoint media references, and the fact that every single line holds a secondary queer significance, the inherent transness of the film stares straight into the camera during every shot. We meet the main character, Owen, as a seventh grader in 1996. He presents as a shy kid with a messy home life and a faint disinterest in the discolored world around him. Early into the film, Owen meets Maddy, an outsider in the ninth grade. While their friendship is unorthodox and somewhat surface-level, they still serve an irreplaceable role in one another's lives. They begin to watch a show called *The Pink Opaque* together and we watch them grow older in stages with and through their interaction with it. The show's importance to the film's theme of separation from

authenticity is hard to miss from the beginning, with the first lines spoken in the movie being the show's character Isabell repeating aloud "They can't hurt you if you don't think about them." These subtle allegorical messages, hinting toward the suppression of unrelenting thoughts and ideas, extend throughout the length of the movie, making every line something to be analyzed for deeper meaning.

The filmmaker, Jane Schoenbrun, spoke in interviews about how *I Saw the TV Glow* unequivocally mirrors their own feelings and experiences as a non-binary person who came out in adulthood, and the background noise of transness that hovered around them all their life. The film makes direct references to iconic 90s TV shows that served as coded sanctuaries for countless queer kids. In discussions of the influences of the film, Schoenbrun described their attachment to shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Adventures of Dan and Dan* in their younger years, and how the encoded queerness within them made room for a real-world language of queerness without ever having to directly speak it. The theme of transness in the film is represented not only by the slow erosion process of reality merging into fantasy, but also by the main character's fight to cling to the ideas of familiarity that exist within it. The construct of transness itself is palpable through the entirety of the movie, but its key operationalization is in the form of a glowing TV and the process of being buried alive.

As we learn more about *The Pink Opaque*, we begin to see eerie similarities between the character Isabell, and Owen's experiences and inner thoughts. When Maddy disappears following the statement "I'm getting out of this town... I'll die if I stay here," the linearity of the film begins to fold. The parallels between Owen and Isabell then become louder and louder as we learn that Isabell has been buried alive in the show and Owen starts to look at us. The fourth wall breaks in the film speak to Owen's isolation following the loss of his support system,

Maddy and his mother, as well as his accelerating descent into a limbo state between a skewed version of fantasy and reality. Existing in both, and in neither all at once. It is here, and within the non-linear timeline of the film that bounces between real time and production time, that the flood gates of queer temporality open. We witness Owen's life in the form of a circle. He is a scared young boy, a powerful teenage girl, and a dying middle aged man, all stacked on top of each other, with no clear cut separation between them. The cyclicity of the film, merging a beginning and an ending into one event, makes Owen's experience and the urge to run from all that is uncertain, make all the more sense. He responds to the internal conflicts he faces in relation to how he believes the external world will allow him to.

In his work "Phenomenology of Perception," (Merleau-Ponty & Landes, 2014) Maurice Merleau-Ponty explores the concept of phenomenology, focusing on how we individually and collectively perceive the world around us. He talks about the object of the table, how it is only a table because it has a typical purpose for which it is used and our bodies interact with it in a shared spatial way. So then, if a pool table is only a pool table because you play a game at it and a dining table is only a dining table because you put your food on it, what makes us trans? I am trans in school and I am trans in public bathrooms. I am trans in my grandmother's house and I am trans at the polls, but am I still trans when I'm only surrounded by other trans people? Am I still trans when I'm alone in my room, and no one's eyes are on me? Even within the authenticity of living in transness, we're still performing. Still molding ourselves in and around the binary that our culture clings to like its hands are stuck. We learn to embody the binary around us because, regardless of our own personal separation from it, we have and likely will only ever live inside of it. The performativity Butler investigates in her work (Butler, 1988), and the visualization of transness through the symbol of a consuming, glowing TV that Owen begs

and claws his way back to before again, ignoring the glow all together, both discuss this phenomenon of associating ourselves with the purpose we are taught to believe it is our duty to serve, lest societal calamity in the form of gender constitutional collapse ensues.

The portrayal of this attachment to normality is a representation of compulsory heterosexuality and the suppression of authenticity. Over and over again, Owen is called toward the glowing TV and all that it represents, and over and over again, we watch him run from it, terrified of what it means. He grows older, gets married, has children, and works a dead end job for years, all within a world that is glitching and crumbling around him. When looked at through the necessary perspective, the ending of *I Saw the TV Glow* is about as heartbreaking as a film ending can be. It depicts Owen, in a state of near-total suffocation, screaming for help in the realization that this burying is killing him. The audience knows that this reality is purely a tortuous construction built to hold in someone who is meant to be something else, somewhere else. And we're forced to watch the slow, agonizing display of how prioritizing familiarity and the providence of other people's comfort, opposed to prioritizing personal authenticity, can bury a person. There is, counterintuitively, a glimmer of hope when Owen locks himself in the bathroom, cuts his chest open, and pulls it apart with his hands, revealing the same glow let out from the TV screen with the newly iconic song "Anthems For A Seventeen Year-Old Girl" by Broken Social Scene wispily playing in the background. This scene represents an official acknowledgement of the authentic self, mirroring Owen's comment to Maddy earlier in the movie "When I think about that stuff it feels like someone took a shovel and dug out all my insides. And I know there's nothing in there but I'm still too nervous to open myself up and check." And it is immediately followed by Owen buttoning his shirt back up and returning to the busy arcade, apologizing to people for his "outburst." Nothing could have better represented the

relentless suppression required to keep one's identity hidden as did Owen's reveal of the truth inside, followed by the quick cover up of it and the apology for looking for it in the first place.

It takes a lot of force and persistence to move through or leave the structured binary of gender constitution. The longer a person lives exclusively inside the binary status they were born into, the more force and persistence required to break away from it. *I Saw the TV Glow* tells the non-linear story of a closeted trans girl who never gets the chance to live as her authentic self because of fear of letting go of the familiar and the jailing nature of the setting she finds herself in. The assumption that we're left with at the end of the film is that this perpetual stuckness is never rectified, and whether we're there to watch it or not, that stuckness is going to kill her. This speaks to Schoenbrun's experience of feeling trapped in a faulty binary, with no end in sight, just as much as it speaks to the stories of the 82% of trans youth who have seriously considered suicide (Austin et al., 2020), and the 82.5% of detransitioners whose key motivations for detransitioning were lack of support and lack of access (Turban et al., 2021). The film models the performativity of gender through a direct and indirect lens, with Owen frozen in the context of performing cisness and heterosexuality to the "real" world, and Isabell buried in the context of magic, media, and acting out a script. Seeing the TV glow has now become a widely used analogy for the realizing of one's transness in and outside of social media circles. It means that to be trans is to truly look at yourself and see. It tells us that regardless of everything, regardless of the time it took to get there or how many times you looked away, it's never too late to turn the TV back on. It's never too late to see the glow.

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