

Simon & Schuster, 1986), country tables.

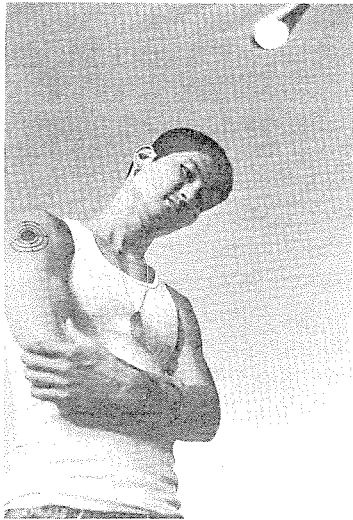
29. Personal interview, Anchana Suwannaonond.
30. However, since the Thai government's implementation of an economic development strategy that has decreased agricultural investment and increased support for an export-oriented economy, many Thai women from rural villages have been forced by landlessness and poverty to seek employment in the big cities. Most of them find work in Thailand's sex industry as prostitutes, bar girls, masseuses, and go-go dancers. For many women, this unfortunate separation from the family often gives them the opportunity to form lesbian-like relationships in the cities, often with women in similar predicaments. A particularly moving testimony is that of Sai (nineteen years old) in *Vindication of the Rights of Whores*, ed. Gail Pheterson (Seattle: Seal Press, 1989), 64, 152, 155–56.
31. Chamrieng Bhavichitra, "Thai Marriage and Family," graduate paper (Indiana University Press, 1962): 35.
32. Personal interview, Anchana Suwannaonond.
33. Chamrieng Bhavichitra.
34. Personal interview, Siriwan.
35. Workshop papers from ALN conference, Bangkok, Thailand, 1990.
36. Personal interview, Siriwan.
37. Workshop papers from ALN conference, Bangkok, Thailand, 1990.
38. Ibid.
39. Alice Henry, Tsehai Berhane-Selassie, & Ruth Wallsgrove, "Feminism in Thailand," *Off Our Backs* (March 1985): 4.
40. Personal interview, Sunny, Santa Monica, California, May 16, 1991.
41. Workshop papers from ALN conference, Bangkok, Thailand, 1990.
42. Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Global* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984), 669.
43. The information on the conservative sector's attitudes towards the tom and dy scene derives from the personal interview with Anchana.
44. Derived from Anchana Suwannaonond's English translation of Unchalee Jongkadeekit's song "Not Wrong."
45. Ibid.

Gregg Araki and the Queer New Wave

Kimberly Yutani

Los Angeles filmmaker Gregg Araki has been getting attention in what has been conveniently dubbed the "Queer New Wave." Film festivals in 1992 have been dominated by a group of gay films including Araki's *The Living End*. These films are some of the "hippest" of independent films, providing fresh, distinctive, and challenging points of view and aesthetics distinguished by unconventionality. They've proven to be marketable—to the point of being screened in mall cineplexes. However, the films receiving the press and funds are for the most part by and represent white males, excluding lesbians and gays of color, and lesbians in general.

Gregg Araki's films came to my attention at the American Film Institute (AFI) film festival with the description of his second film, *the long weekend (o' despair)* (1989): "a minimalistic gay/bisexual postpunk antithesis to the smug complacency of regressive Hollywood tripe like *The Big Chill*." Then PBS aired his first feature, *three bewildered people in the night* (1987), which I found equally self-absorbed, dark, humorous, and entertaining. Both films were made on \$5,000 budgets with Araki doing everything: financing, directing, shooting, editing. These raw, grainy, black-and-white films set an example for what



Director Gregg Araki. Photograph courtesy of Eric Nakamura/Eyebbox.

independent cinema strives for (or at least should)—and represent the unrepresented in the mainstream Hollywood movies. Araki is first to admit that his films “come from a dark, personal place” and makes no qualms about representing a subculture of a generation of twenty-ish characters defined more by what music they listen to than anything else. His characters are predominantly artists, gay/lesbian/bisexual, alienated, and filled with “post-modern angst” to the hilt, who wander through an eerily glamorous and uninhabited nighttime Los Angeles (Araki eschews location permits) of mini-malls, parking structures, and darkened apartments.

More recently, Araki’s film *The Living End*, incorporates all of the rawness, anger, quiriness, and despair of his previous films to create a color, bigger-budgeted movie that challenges the “couple on-the-run road movie” genre by having two gay HIV-positive lovers as its protagonists, and bashes back at some of the more “evil and oppressive” members of society (gay bashers; gay bashers in sex, lies, and videotape T-shirts; police; Bush) and has a lot of cathartic fun along the way. *The Living End* also has received both independent and mainstream attention during the past year amidst the Queer New Wave.

Indeed, calling the group of exceedingly popular and successful films made by and representing gays and lesbians a “Queer New Wave” is controversial. Although positive feedback (critically and financially) proves queer films have an audience, such labels are simply convenient and pigeonhole and limit the works and filmmakers, overlooking the fact that lesbians and gays have always made movies. Most concisely, B. Ruby Rich explains:

Of course, the new queer films and videos aren’t all the same, and don’t share a single aesthetic vocabulary or strategy or concern. Yet they are nonetheless united by a common style. Call it Homo Pomo: there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitely 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.¹

With this, films by Christopher Munch, Tom Kalin, and Derek Jarman come to mind. These films “out” the past and reevaluate history: Kalin’s *Swoon* (1992) is another depiction, along with Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948) and Fleischer’s *Compulsion* (1959), of the murderers Leopold and Loeb—yet this time they are explicitly lovers. Munch’s *The Hours and Times* (1991) also takes on famous subjects, John Lennon and Beatles’ manager Brian Epstein, their weekend trip to Barcelona and explores the extent of the relationship between the men. While Kalin and Munch are relatively new names to the “queer film scene,” Derek Jarman is a pioneer of sorts with his films: *Sebastiane* (1975), *Jubilee* (1977), *Angelic Conversation* (1984), and *The Last of England* (1987). His most recent, *Edward II* (1991), goes back in history to out Christopher Marlowe, Marlowe’s play, and a king—and examines homophobia and misogyny—within a narrative that combines the period piece with the contemporary radical political action of Britain’s OutRage.

When discussing the Queer New Wave of the 90s, the big winners of the 1991 Sundance Film Festival cannot be overlooked. Todd Haynes’ *Poison* (1991) and Jennie Livingston’s documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990) are groundbreaking works. Not only did they reveal a definite audience for gay films, Haynes’ Genet-inspired *Poison* took risks in creating a non-linear narrative to interweave three tales (Hero, Horror, Homo) into one film, to make an idiosyncratic but coherent work. It also created a controversial (and ticket selling) stir with the NEA. At the same time, Livingston’s winning documentary of New York City drag balls featuring black and Latino gay men exposes a marginalized group within a marginalized group. Meanwhile Gus Van Sant—whose *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) used two “teen idol” actors (Keanu Reeves and River Phoenix) to explore the world of Portland street hustlers, experimenting with narrative by slipping Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* into his gritty, funny, and sensitive work.

For the most part, the Queer New Wave has been dominated by white males as both artists and subjects, and Gregg Araki’s *The Living End* is commonly included in mass media. Araki defines himself as “a gay Asian American” and “a card-carrying (albeit controversial) member of two, count ‘em, two, ‘oppressed’ subcultural groups.”² During the summer of 1992, when Araki emblazoned an *LA Weekly* cover (August 21–27, 1992) as the “guerrilla godard,” a friend of

mine remarked, "He's beautiful.... Why doesn't he have Asian characters in his films?" Indeed, his "lacking of color" in his films is a point that deems him controversial, particularly in the Asian American community. So far all of his films have only featured white characters. The absence of characters of color in his three films make it difficult to discuss his films in any context of ethnicity. Yet looking at his films and judging from what he says, for Araki, ethnicity isn't necessarily an issue. I spoke to him about this point to which he responded, "I've always wanted to have an Asian character in my films but it just comes down to who the best actor is. I mean, I think I should choose the best actor before I judge ethnicity."³ While in the past he was working under extremely limited budgets, his more substantially funded upcoming film, *Totally F***ed Up*, his "gay John Hughes movie directed by Godard," features a multiethnic (Latino, half African-American, Persian, and half, yes, Asian) cast of teens. Such a film might appease some of his critics—with this addition of color—yet is his philosophy "acceptable"? Araki says of *Totally F***ed Up*, "The parts are not written in any sort of ethnic way. Their ethnicity was completely interchangeable. The ethnicity of the characters was like wardrobe, essentially."⁴ Again, as in all of his films, the relationships are bound not by ethnicity, but by the interests and sexuality of Americanized, "integrated," characters. Filmmaker Roddy Bogawa takes a similar stance and questions expectations from him as an Asian American and filmmaker: "Why should the work be discussed in terms of my racial identity?"⁵

Few Asian American filmmakers (gay or straight) are discussing gay or lesbian issues in an Asian context with perhaps, the exception of Richard Fung and a few others (incidentally, Fung's piece in *Moving the Image* is recommended reading regarding the mutual exclusiveness of "gay" and "Asian" work). In addition, the issues at hand are complicated. Fung remarks, "Many Asian or gay and lesbian tapes and films are still guided by notions of 'positive images.'"⁶ Within a marginalized group, there is a concern as to how one is being portrayed in respect to "the bigger picture." What distinguishes the new queer films from say, the TV movie of the week, is the idea of "political correctness" or "positive images." *My Own Private Idaho* was criticized for its narcoleptic hustler character, *Swoon* boldly tackles the gay murderers Leopold and Loeb, while *The Living End* is ironically billed as "an irresponsible movie by gregg araki." Araki's HIV-positive lovers aren't distracted by preachy morality, but are guided by a *carpe diem* philosophy in their nihilistic situation where they wield guns, extinguish their enemies, hit the road, and have unsafe sex. In short, what is occurring is an unselfconscious group of filmmakers taking narrative and formal risks and creating complex characters.

While most of the criticism of the Queer New Wave concerns the absence of women, a good deal of criticism of *The Living End* comes from the representation of women. In *The Living End* the women are inconsequential. The

protagonists are on the run from the law, in an opposites attract, l'amour fou genre film made gay. Jon (Craig Gilmore) is a cute, uptight film critic while Luke looks and acts like a queer frat boy but is a likeable, complete romantic. The hitchhiking Luke (Mike Dytri) has a run-in with two "killer" lesbians (a sensitive subject since the *Basic Instinct* uproar). The women are minor, innocuous, campy characters, and simply add to the over-the-top tone of the hostile city life that the protagonists escape. The lesbian characters (Fern and Daisy, played by performance artist Johann Went and ex-Warhol actress Mary Woronov) are amusing, inefficient killers who function more as targets to ridicule lesbians who stereotypically listen to folk music—"Don't these wenches listen to anything besides k. d. lang and Michelle Shocked?" Luke wonders. However, what does deserve criticism is the character of Darcy, played by Darcy Marta who starred in Araki's three bewildered people. Darcy serves as the ultimate fag hag—she's an artist herself (frustrated), has an inert boyfriend, is Jon's confidant who listens to his problems, worries about him to the point that her own life is disrupted, waits for his calls (collect), cleans up matters for him while he's being irresponsible. Perhaps it's an attempt to echo the relationship in three bewildered people between the straight woman (Alicia) and David, the gay male, but where it's handled less skillfully. In the love triangle between Alicia, David, and Craig—Alicia is essential to the narrative (and even has equal share in complainer and complaine status)—whereas in *The Living End*, Darcy's presence is disruptive and intrusive to the main, "real" story of the boys on the road.

Not only is the representation of lesbians and women in general lacking, but lesbian filmmakers are conspicuously absent from the queer cinema movement. Lesbian filmmakers have been subject to limited funding, hence confining their work to video—although in fact, eighteen year-old Sadie Benning has been a film fest favorite with her twenty-dollar budgeted self-as-subject videos shot with a Fisher-Price Pixelvision camera. However, according to Cherry Smyth: "It is hardly surprising, in terms of economics alone, that more queer women are working in photography than in film or video. In the New Queer Wave, lesbians are drowning."⁷ Apparently there are lesbian filmmakers in the film festival circuit (working in video, creating short films, documentaries), but they are vastly overshadowed by the men who are making the feature-length, narrative films that attract the attention of both funding and press. British filmmaker Pratibha Parmar's documentaries *A Place of Rage* (not necessarily queer but "queer positive" feminist, featuring Angela Davis, Alice Walker, and Trinh T. Minh-ha) and *Khush* are impressive works but are seldom mentioned alongside the works of Araki, Kalin, Haynes, etc.

Parmar echoes Smyth's sentiments and adds: "these festivals are programmed predominantly by white gay men and women, who prioritize their own constituencies, further marginalizing queers of color."⁸ Parmar has a

point, but that is not to say filmmakers of color (although mostly male) are not getting attention in the Queer New Wave. Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied*, featuring the sensual poetry of Essex Hemphill and looking unabashedly at "black men loving black men" caused a stir when PBS aired the film in its P.O.V. series. Isaac Julien from Britain, whose *Passion of Remembrance* (1986) and *Looking for Langston* (1989) now seem like gay "classics," made *Young Soul Rebels* (1991), which takes on an interracial relationship between a punk and a soul boy, and racial and homophobic violence in London during the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977. At the same time and locale is Hanif Kureishi's *London Kills Me* (1992), which in Kureishi's directing debut, chose to explore street life and drugs rather than his "expertise" of sexual politics and racial issues of his previous screenwritings, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1984) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987).

The absence of lesbian filmmakers and representation within queer cinema, and lesbians and gays of color is problematic, and disturbingly replicates the mainstream in a sense. Although gender and racial inequality exists in what is an exciting movement of progress, optimistically, the queer films being made are creating the space for lesbians and lesbians and gays of color. The queer films are unconventional, risk-taking, and thought-provoking—all of the characteristics that I have consistently seen in Gregg Araki's work—and deserve a permanent space in an independent film forum. Araki's upcoming *Totally F***ed Up* is definitely something to look forward to, featuring half-Vietnamese actor Jimmy Duval, whom he boasts is his new superstar ("my Joe Dallesandro"). And perhaps the superficial "Queer Cinema" label will be shed with the aforementioned Chris Munch, Jennie Livingston, Todd Haynes making films sans "gay themes." Araki adds that his fifth, his "straight" film promises to be his most offensive and shocking, reassuring that his edge is a permanent fixture in independent cinema.

Notes

1. B. Ruby Rich, "A Queer Sensation," *The Village Voice*, 24 March 1992, 42.
2. Gregg Araki, *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts* (Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, UCLA and Visual Communications, 1991), 69.
3. Author interview with Araki, March 5, 1992.
4. Lawrence Chua, "Profiles and Positions," *BOMB* (Fall 1992): 27.
5. Roddy Bogawa, "An(other) Reflection on Race?" *Moving the Image*, 209.
6. Richard Fung, "Center the Margins," *Moving the Image*, 67.
7. Cherry Smyth, "Trash Femme Cocktail," *Sight and Sound* (September 1992): 39.
8. Pratibha Parmar, "Queer Questions," *Sight and Sound* (September 1992): 35.

Looking for My Penis

The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn

Richard Fung

Several scientists have begun to examine the relation between personality and human reproductive behavior from a gene-based evolutionary perspective.... In this vein we reported a study of racial difference in sexual restraint such that Orientals > whites > blacks. Restraint was indexed in numerous ways, having in common a lowered allocation of bodily energy to sexual functioning. We found the same racial pattern occurred on gamete production (dizygotic birthing frequency per 100: Mongoloids, 4; Caucasoids, 8; Negroids, 16), intercourse frequencies (premarital, marital, extramarital), developmental precocity (age at first intercourse, age at first pregnancy, number of pregnancies), primary sexual characteristics (size of penis, vagina, testis, ovaries), secondary sexual characteristics (salient voice, muscularity, buttocks, breasts), and biologic control of behavior (periodicity of sexual response predictability of life history from onset of puberty), as well as in androgen levels and sexual attitudes.¹

This passage from the *Journal of Research in Personality* was written by University of Western Ontario psychologist Philippe Rushton, who enjoys considerable controversy in Canadian academic circles and in the popular media. His thesis, articulated throughout his work, appropriates biological studies of the continuum of reproductive strategies of oysters through chimpanzees and posits that degree of "sexuality"—interpreted as penis and vagina size, frequency of intercourse, buttock and lip size—correlates positively with criminality and sociopathic behavior and inversely with intelligence, health, and longevity. Rushton sees race as the determining factor and places East Asians (Rushton uses the word *Orientals*) on one end of the spectrum and blacks on the other. Since whites fall squarely in the middle, the position of perfect balance, there is no need for analysis, and they remain free of scrutiny.

Notwithstanding its profound scientific shortcomings, Rushton's work serves as an excellent articulation of a dominant discourse on race and sexuality in Western society—a system of ideas and reciprocal practices that originated in Europe simultaneously with (some argue as a conscious justification for²) colo-

10. *Ibid.*, p. 23. Butler's work offers a number of concepts that are quite provocative in relation to Child's films, particularly her conception of heterosexuality as a compulsive and compulsory repetition, a panicked imitation of its own phantasmatic ideal, which can potentially be destabilized by the parodic and imitative effects of gay identities, as well as her notion of "subversive repetition," of exploring the moments of rupture within heterosexual repetition, as potentially productive strategies for lesbian and gay cultural practice.
11. Abigail Child, "Program Notes: *Is This What You Were Born For?*" San Francisco Cinematheque (February 22, 1990).
12. Madeline Leskin, "Interview with Abigail Child," *Motion Picture* vol. 3, no. 1/2 (Winter, 1989-90). Reprinted from *Skop* (West Berlin, February, 1988).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
14. Matias Viegner, "Gay Fanzines: There's Trouble in That Body," *Afterimage* (January, 1991). Expanded and republished as "Kinky Escapes, Bedroom Techniques, Unbridled Passion and Secret Sex Codes," in David Bergman, ed., *Camp Grounds* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993).
15. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
16. Critical writings on Dougherty's work include Valerie Soe, "Cecilia Dougherty/*Grapefruit*," *Cinematograph* no. 4 (1991) and Liz Kotz "Interrogating the Boundaries of Women's Art: New Work in Video by Four Women," *High Performance*, no. 48 (Winter, 1989). Dougherty's tapes are distributed by the Video Data Bank (*Grapefruit* and *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*) and Frameline (*Sick, Kathy*).
17. Interview with the artist, San Francisco, January, 1991.
18. Coming from a younger generation of videomakers, most of whom were directly or indirectly influenced by the punk movement, this rejection of liberal and gay-assimilationist mandates for "realist" representation has parallels with the cultural scavenging and anti-aesthetic disruption of the gay fanzine circuit. See Viegner, "Gay Fanzines: There's Trouble in That Body," and his essay in this volume.
19. Critical writings and interviews on Friedrich's work include Scott MacDonald's "Interview with Su Friedrich," *The Independent* (December, 1990); Martha Gever, "Girl Crazy: Lesbian Narratives in *She Must Be Seeing Things* and *Damned If You Don't*," *The Independent* (July, 1988); Scott MacDonald, "Reappropriations," *Film Quarterly* (Winter, 1987/88); Bruce Jenkins, "Gently Down the Stream," *Millennium Film Journal*, nos. 16/17/18 (Summer, 1986); Stephanie Beroes, "Interviews with New York Filmmakers," *Cinematograph* no. 2 (1986); Barbara Kruger, "The Ties That Bind," *Artforum* (October, 1984); and Lindley Hanlon, "Female Rage: The Films of Su Friedrich," *Millennium Film Journal* no. 12 (Fall-Winter 1982-83). Friedrich's films are distributed by Film-makers Cooperative, Women Make Movies, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, Canyon Cinema in San Francisco, and the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Center.
20. Su Friedrich, statement from the panel, "Does Radical Content Deserve Radical Form?" *Millennium Film Journal* no. 22 (Winter/Spring 1989-90) pp. 122-123.
21. Scott MacDonald, "Su Friedrich: Reappropriations," pp. 41-42.
22. The writing of this article was supported by a New Writings in Art Criticism grant from San Francisco Artspace. It was initially given as a talk at the Whitney Symposium on American Art in March, 1990. Much thanks to Erika Suderburg for comments on drafts on this paper, and to the artists for extensively discussing their works with me.

Girlfriend in a Coma: Notes on the Films of Gregg Araki

DARYL CHIN

Asian-American films have been typed as being about socially progressive Asian-American subject matter. Most gay films are narrative love stories: two men or two women fall in love, with results that are either happy or unhappy. Gregg Araki is an Asian-American who does not make Asian-American films. He is a gay filmmaker whose films do not configure solely gay concerns.

Araki is a young, Los Angeles-based filmmaker whose first two feature films, *Three Bewildered People in the Night* (1987) and *The Long Weekend* (*O' Despair*) (1989) are highly unusual. They are unusual not just because



Left to right: Alicia (Darcy Marta), David (Mark Howell), and Craig (John Lacques) in *Three Bewildered People in the Night*, Gregg Araki



Left to right: Bretton Vail, Nicole Dillenberg, and Maureen Dondanville in *The Long Weekend (O' Despair)*, Gregg Araki

his budgets are extremely low, but because his approach is artisanal in that he wrote, directed, and produced these narrative features while also acting as cameraman, chief sound recordist, and editor on both projects.

Araki was born in Southern California in 1959. He received his B.A. in film studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1982, and his M.F.A. in film production from the University of Southern California in 1985. Given his background and education, Araki's choice to pursue dramatic filmmaking seems logical. What sets Araki apart, however, is his refusal to satisfy the expectations associated with such an endeavor.

Most of the Asian-American media produced in Southern California depicts social and political issues pertaining to the Asian-American community, or traces the maker's personal Asian-American heritage. In concrete terms, this translates into documentaries about Angel Island or the internment camps, interviews with parents and grandparents, or fictional narratives dealing with the immigrant experience. When attending film school, Asian-Americans are encouraged to move in that direction.

Another pressure is applied as well: the pressure to adhere to motion picture industry standards. Narrative filmmaking serves as the sole model of filmmaking practice, and most students attend such schools in order to

become proficient in this mode of commercial production. As a result, the filmmakers produced by this system often attempt to create the kind of narrative transparency favored in Hollywood. After graduating from the film production course at USC, for example, the young filmmaker has been indoctrinated in the style (or stylelessness) of apparent seamless continuity, smooth editing, and polished camerawork.

Araki is the antithesis of all this. His two films concern the psychosexual problems of Los Angeles postgraduates, who are often embroiled in intensely solipsistic love relationships. *Three Bewildered People in the Night* presents a study of a few days in the lives of a young woman who is a video artist, her boyfriend who is between jobs and confused about his sexuality, and her best friend, a gay male performance artist. To describe the "plot" in this way is to overstate the case, because the film itself does not explicate any of the above in overt terms. A typical scene is one near the beginning of the film, in which the young woman returns late from a night of editing. She opens the door to find her boyfriend sitting in the dark, staring out of the window. The scene is played out in a series of cross-cut shots in which each character is never placed in the center of the frame but always off to the side and surrounded by a great deal of empty space. In a typical shot of this kind, the boyfriend appears at the left of the frame, staring to his right and speaking to his girlfriend who is off-screen right. Although he looks towards where she would logically be positioned, his gaze is slightly averted, not direct. Both characters remain isolated, even when engaged in dialogue, which consists of evasive non sequiturs that echo the visual effect.

In *Three Bewildered People in the Night*, suspense revolves around the ambiguity of the relationship which develops between the two male characters. Moments of stasis, ennui, and depleted action—which are certainly plentiful—are nevertheless haunted by the possibility of sexual interest, although the film ends without a resolution. As a result, *Three Bewildered People in the Night* could be called an almost-love story, which flirts with sexual expression but never makes it to consummation. The film teases viewers with the promise of narrative closure, and plays on the reliability of gay film stories to conclude with the fulfillment of sexual desire. Frustrating that fulfillment, however, the film throws desire into relief in the same way that recurring stasis in the film throws the idea of narrative movement into relief.

In *The Long Weekend (O' Despair)*, Araki ups the ante by multiplying the interactions between characters. This film is populated by three couples: two men, two women, and one of each, who gather for a weekend reunion. However, the increased number of characters demands a greater emphasis on plot than in the earlier work, and the tension of narrative displacement which sustained *Three Bewildered People* becomes dissipated in this film.

Still, the two works are similar in many respects. Like *Three Bewildered People*, *The Long Weekend* is not easy to watch. Again, Araki drains his narrative by presenting scenarios of attenuated inactivity, while the audience is asked to endure minute-by-minute reports of the angst afflicting the various characters. Over time, however, these moments become emblematic of the search for genuine contact with the reality of present-day Los Angeles. In the later film, there is more contact than occurred in *Three Bewildered People*, with more scenes where the characters crowd into the same space, framed together in the cramped surroundings of small apartments and unfashionable clubs which make up bohemian L.A. Still, the sense of isolation prevalent in Araki's earlier film persists, because these characters, too, rarely look one another in the eye.

Most low-budget feature films attempt to recreate the illusions of realism common to commercial cinema, but with smaller budgets. Not Araki. Recognizing that his movies are not commercial, he allows for intentional stylistic roughness in order to emphasize the qualities of grit, contrast, and disjunction that underscore his characteristic portrayal of a generation adrift. His narratives do not flow. Rather, they proceed through ellipses, blockages, emptiness, devices which break the continuity to allow for breathing. There are notable similarities between this aspect of Araki's method and earlier cinematic precedents. Araki's use of temporal extension to invoke an awareness of the conditions of the filmmaking practice was one of the strategies employed by Andy Warhol in a film such as *Blow Job* (1963), where Warhol uses the metaphor of sexual consummation to define narrative continuity—but teasingly, outside the frame. In many respects, Araki tries to position his work in this arena, stretching time to reveal the seams in the work. Like Warhol, he wants to remind the viewer of the fact of the film, provoking an illusion and then holding that illusion up to scrutiny. Although Araki's films distend time, however, they do not exhibit Warhol's interest in issues of real time and spacial continuity. Instead, Araki hews to narrative continuity, a significant departure from the simple sequential order that characterizes Warhol's film work before *Chelsea Girls* (1966).

Visually, Araki's films are immediately arresting, with a compositional boldness that is always enticing. He is attracted to the quality of light within the artificially lit urban landscape—buildings and streets pierced by the sharpness of neon lights. Shooting with black-and-white, 16mm Tri-X stock, which can record photographic images in very low light, Araki surveys a variety of locations in and around Los Angeles, wandering the streets at night to render compositions that reveal the particular architectural dissonance of that city, with its mismatched styles and insistent decorative touches. Araki's images often have the quality of charcoal smudges, with the film's graininess causing shades of grey and black to bleed together. In contrast, the rhythms

that Araki establishes through editing are often choppy, emphasizing discord rather than continuity, and eliciting discomfort. The erratic pacing suggests a narrative trope, as editing disjunction evolves into narrative disjunction and tension builds through elision.

It seems too easy to categorize Araki's achievements, to try to tame the jagged edges of his work through interpretation. For example, it would be easy to claim that the frustrated sexual desire in the films can be read in terms of the lack of acknowledgment of the validity of homosexuality in mainstream society. It would be easy to claim that the dislocation of desire which motivates the actions of his films can be extended to include the dislocation of identity through the inequities of race in American society. Taking Araki's films as metaphors for social conditions is tempting, but that temptation should be resisted, since interpreting these works according to an imposed sociopolitical agenda denies their tendency toward autistic self-enclosure. Ironically, it is precisely this quality that accounts for much of their appeal: Araki's films at once invite and negate the prospect of audience involvement. His work disdains easy pleasure and so provides a friction which rivets attention at the same time as it mobilizes wariness of the obstacles to pleasure which he constructs.

In a far less literary way, Araki also wants to provoke self-consciousness about forms of media presentation. Elongating dramatic time, he reestablishes contemplative time. Similarly, there is a certain conscious decision to frustrate narrative and dramatic conventions in order to promote the audience's critical awareness of the limitations of what's on the screen. Unlike Godard, Straub and Huillet, and Fassbinder, who all used formal restructuring of narrative to engender such self-consciousness, Araki remains ambivalent about his negations of and resistances to narrative convention. This ambivalence then finds a correlative in his depiction of frustrated desire.

Although singular, Araki should be counted as a full member of the community of independent feature filmmakers. As a one-man production company of feature-length narratives, his process is similar to Jon Jost's. As a gay filmmaker experimenting with narrative, his work is related to that of Todd Haynes, Jack Walsh, Su Friedrich, Peggy Awesh, and Gus Van Sant. As an Asian-American filmmaker working with nontraditional subject matter, he has affinities with Roddy Bogawa, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Jon Moritsugu. What is unique about Araki's filmmaking, though, is the combination of his artistic ambitions. Gregg Araki has already proved himself to be a challenging artist. The hope is that he will develop into an artist of continual provocation.

HARD CORE INDEPENDENT

Interview with Gregg Araki

Ariane Simard

Gregg Araki burst on the scene with *The Living End*, his movie about two HIV positive gay men on the road. It had nothing to do with Asian American issues or characters but suddenly, Araki was one of the highest profile independent Asian American filmmakers out there.

The worst thing about interviewing Gregg Araki in a Starbucks on Sunset and La Brea is the simpering music in the background that Starbucks is trying to pass off as jazz. In a perfect world, every Gregg Araki interview would be accompanied by its own alternative/punk soundtrack. If you had seen Araki in the mid 1980's, sitting in the corner of Double Rainbow on Melrose, smoking, drinking coffee and filling page after page, you would have thought you had run into a pre-millennial Milton. No other filmmaker can boast the following as Gregg Araki can: he's an independent filmmaker who maintains his ideals; he's managed to do this without selling out and that, despite a bad boy media created persona, Gregg Araki is a really nice guy.

Ariane Simard: Why do you hang out in coffee shops?

Gregg Araki: It's from my "Double Rainbow" days. I do the original writing in coffee shops. It's conditioning I think. It's hard for me to write at home. I can edit at home, do all my inputting and that stuff, but my actual work I always do somewhere outside of the house. I put my walkman on and go out. All of my scripts have been written someplace in the city. From there it goes through several phases. The first stage is always scrawled stuff. I just have a hard time writing fresh on a computer. It seems to flow better on paper.

AS: Your characters tend to be really...bored. But you don't seem bored.

GA: Bored coffee shop kids. There's a big difference between my characters and myself. People frequently mistake my movies for being autobiographical, but they're not. They're just sort of products of my imagination. I just find autobiographical film limiting and boring. My films are based on people I know or things that have hap-

pened, but they're unlimited by reality. It's just more interesting to me to do a work from my imagination.

AS: Are you from LA?

GA: I was born here, but I grew up in Santa Barbara, so my films have just a very hard-core kind of Southern California rhythm and aesthetic.

AS: And you're Japanese...

GA: Japanese-American, both my parents are full Japanese-American, my grandparents came over from Japan, I don't know what that makes me, second generation, third generation....The thing about me is that, because I was raised in Santa Barbara, which is really white and Latino, but really very few Blacks and Asians, I grew up in a very assimilated climate. I'm not really rooted in my ethnicity.

AS: So how does your Southern Californian upbringing inform your movies?

GA: One of the things I like about Southern California in general and in my movies in particular, is that there is a very sort of laissez faire attitude about race. In my movies race is de-emphasized as an issue. I realize it's still an issue for a lot of people, but in my world it's not really a big issue. It's not something I think about or something that my friends and I really care about. When I'm with my friends, whatever race they might be, it's not like we stand around and say: "Wow, You're Latino and I'm Asian. You're white. Isn't it great that we all get along." It's something that's not even discussed. It's part of the world, but not a hot-button issue [for us].

AS: And you think that's indicative of Southern California?

GA: I think it has something to do with Southern California. I appreciate California for its laid back and its "it's all good" nature. Be-

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GREGG ARAKI

cause I grew up here, it's a big part of my sensibility. I'm not saying that racism does not exist, or that it's not important, or that it's not one of society's ills. It just doesn't happen to be one of my ills.

AS: Don't you think racism reared its ugly head again. We had the riots in 1992 in Los Angeles, racial profiling, loss of affirmative action, even this interview has an agenda, I mean we're pigeon holing you as an Asian-American filmmaker for the purposes of this book.

GA: To me it all begins with the individual. I realize that as a filmmaker I frequently get pigeon holed, in both the Asian pigeon hole and also the gay/queer pigeon hole. I don't sit down as a filmmaker, in my practicing day to day life, and say I'm a gay-Asian filmmaker and this is my movie. I'm who I am and I just am expressing myself in whatever way I want to creatively express myself. As a filmmaker, you have absolutely no control over other people's perceptions of you or how the media will categorize things and compartmentalize people or fragment everything into all these easily digestible categories. I can't control that, but as a filmmaker I don't let that limit me. It comes from my punk rock/alternative sense of rebellion and not wanting to be shoved in the round hole. Feeling like it's okay to not fit in and just do whatever you want to do. It's weird to me, I find that with the race issue and the gay issue too, people have a great need to belong to something, people find great comfort in belonging to a herd. It's something as a person that I've never felt a particular comfort in. I've never felt that I need to fit into a community. I'm my own person. I do my own thing. If it's accepted, it's accepted, if it's not, it's not. It's not a priority in my life to please other people.

AS: Punk seems to have been a huge influence.

GA: Punk more than race or sexuality has been a formative influence. That whole explosion was happening when I was in college, all these ideologies...

AS: You feel like punk really was an ideology?

GA: I definitely think so. The whole DIY philosophy behind it, that you don't have to conform, that you don't have to go the corporate rock route, that you can do the grassroots thing and be artistically pure and all that, which is obviously kind of naive and bullshit in its own way, but just that idea was a big influence on me. It's true to this day that even in this post punk world, there's a certain purity and a certain satisfaction from doing your own thing and it reaching an audience and not necessarily crossing over and becoming the huge mainstream mega crazy success, that everyone else views as what's important or successful. All my most favorite bands never achieved any kind of popularity. That doesn't make them any less important than Ricky

Martin or The Backstreet Boys, it makes them less popular. Which brings into question the whole idea of what popularity is and what it means in the first place. So if you do something that's yours and it's true and it's right and it's what you want to do and it reaches this audience no matter what size this audience is, it's a great thing.

AS: How did you get this viewpoint, especially in a place like a LA where everyone is vying to become the next Quentin Tarantino or the next Kevin Smith.

GA: The media has created this Sundance monster. There are so many filmmakers who want to make movies just to be like Quentin Tarantino or Kevin Smith and they have absolutely nothing to say. They're not artists in any sense of the word. It's not specific to film, we live in a culture of media and magazines and popularity and phenomenon. As an artist, you have to maintain your own sanity and keep focused on what's really important which is your work. It's work to keep yourself focused.

AS: You get a lot of your financing from France. Do they treat you better?

GA: *The Doom Generation* and *Nowhere* were both financed out of Europe. Yes, they treat you better for the most part, in the sense that France is a very auteur driven country and it's all about the "auteur". But it's sad in the sense that the Hollywood globalization [of cinema] affects not just Europe but the whole independent world—that it's getting harder and harder to make movies. Even the independent companies are getting greedier and greedier. Everyone wants to be like Miramax, or like Artisan with its fluke hit *Blair Witch* and that's their watermark now. They don't want to make \$1 million off a \$2 million dollar movie, they want to make \$100 million off a \$50,000 movie. They are not trying to be an alternative to Hollywood. They are trying to be Hollywood.

AS: Both *The Living End* and Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* brought homosexual love stories to the mainstream. Both were made by Asian men. Can you comment on that?

GA: (laughing) It's hard for me to comment on that.

AS: Did you like *The Wedding Banquet*?

GA: It's hard for me to say because I don't know where it came from. I definitely know where *The Living End* came from because I made it. It was definitely expressing a lot of the anger and angst that I was feeling at that time, plus being gay/bisexual, I feel I know the sensibility. I didn't understand where *The Wedding Banquet* came

from, because Ang's not gay, he's straight. To me, it clicked with this sort of uprising of gay movies at the time.

AS: What do you think when someone like Lucy Liu says Asia finally being portrayed on screen?

GA: I think it's good obviously. I think it's the same thing you hear when African American representation is increased on screen and that the census just came in, and that it's a fact now, the white majority is no longer a majority. We do live in a multi-culture. Which is why Hollywood, in its quest to make a movie that pleases everybody, has to realize that. That's why you see crazy Miramax movies with the random rap star thrown in. But by my own sensibility, I think that's a great thing. But the back to some of these movies for me, are yes, Blacks are represented and Asians are represented, but if you look closely, based upon total stereotypes and old clichés. If you look at *Hour*, the whole joke is that you have a Black guy and a C guy and the clash of cultures. A lot of this Asian Invasion is based on kung fu and cool effects.

AS: Do you think in the same way that all the German Expressionists shaped noir in the 1940's, the new Asian directors are shaping the action movie so that we may never see another fight scene out a kowtow to kung fu?

GA: Yeah, but that has more to do with *The Matrix* than anything. But can *The Matrix* be claimed as an Asian-American movie? It's a stretch. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* owes all its success to *The Matrix*, clearly. The Wong Kar-wai movie *In the Mood for Love* didn't make five cents at the box office. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon's* appeal was not its "Asian-ness" but in its fight scene

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AS: Gay culture uses the term, "family of choice" which is a good description for the characters in *Totally Fucked Up*, but also a good way to talk about marginalization. I feel like there's this equivalent between marginalization of sexuality and marginalization of ethnicity. I feel like gay culture has given us a language to talk about it.

GA: I don't know if I would agree with that. I think that people have this innate need to be part of a tribe. I think that's where a lot of this fragmentation comes from. In *Totally Fucked Up* – which is the most tribe "family of choice" movie and *Nowhere* too – is that the tribe is a meta-tribe, in the sense that it's transcendent of all those boundaries. You'll find in gay culture, if we're talking about West Hollywood gay culture, it's very racist, very anti-woman. The kids in *Totally Fucked Up* are multi-racial, there's a lesbian couple, so there's something about their little family that's outside of gay culture's "family of choice". They are outsiders within their own corporal tribe. The same is true of *Nowhere* where the kids are not only multi-ethnic, multicultural, but it's also multi-sexual, where the kids are gay, straight, bi-sexual and they don't really differentiate. I like to think of it as being beyond all that sort of fragmentation. In this sort of optimistic way, maybe I'm just projecting on this newer generation where race doesn't matter, sexuality doesn't matter. One of the things that helps to blur those lines – which to me is a much more interesting way to live life – is that there are so many people of this next generation who are mixed race, or who don't have rigidly defined sexual identities, and those people are much more interesting in that they represent (laughing) the new master race. In the sense that they are sort of beyond race and beyond sexual categories. That's why I have such a difficult time with that whole compartmentalizing attitude, because I think it's so limiting to people. I think it's part of human nature to want to belong to a tribe, but I think those tribes in themselves can be kind of stultifying.