

Queer Temporality and Identity in Jane Shoenbrun's 'I Saw the TV Glow' –

A Queer Media Analysis

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Introduction

I Saw the TV Glow, directed by Jane Schoenbrun, is a psychological horror film that explores themes of identity, isolation, and the breakdown of reality. The story centers around two teenagers, Owen and Maddy, whose friendship is fuelled by their obsession with a supernatural TV show called *The Pink Opaque*. This TV show, featuring two teenage girls, Isabel and Tara, who fight evil forces through their psychic connection, becomes a distorted reflection of Owen and Maddy's lives.

Owen, in seventh grade, struggles with a deep sense of alienation and disconnect from the world, while Maddy, in ninth grade, lives in an abusive home environment. Together, they find an escape in the world of *The Pink Opaque*, a show where Isabel and Tara constantly battle the “big bad,” Mr. Melancholy, an evil force who distorts time and reality. His goal is to trap Isabel and Tara in the Midnight Realm, a world where the characters are unable to be their true selves. Over time, the TV show blurs the line between fiction and reality for Owen and Maddy, which leads to Maddy's decision to leave town and Owen's refusal to follow her. Maddy disappears, leaving behind a burning TV set and a VHS tape of the show's final episode. The film follows Owen as he rapidly grows older, haunted by memories of Maddy and the ending of *The Pink Opaque*.

Heteronormativity & Queer Temporality

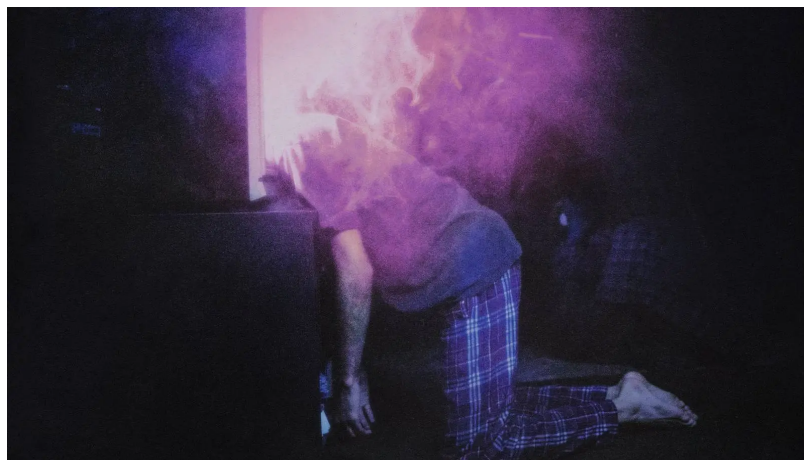
In the film, Mr. Melancholy represents heteronormativity, the societal system that enforces strict norms about gender and sexuality. His manipulation of time and reality acts as a metaphor for how these structures confine and distort queer lives, much like how heteronormative “timeframes” such as getting married and having children often does not fit the queer experience. The way he traps Isabel and Tara in the Midnight Realm mirrors the way queer

people are often socialized into performing versions of themselves that are “acceptable” within the heteronormative framework.

This connects to the concept of “queer time,” which exists outside the traditional, heteronormative structure of time. For Owen, this fragmented sense of time becomes especially apparent after Maddy disappears. He explains that decades feel like seconds (Shoenbrun, 2024) as his life spirals out of control, symbolizing how queer people tend to experience time as non-linear, especially when forced to conform to societal norms that do not reflect their true selves.

The Final Episode

The burning TV set Maddy leaves behind after disappearing symbolizes the rupture between Owen and his connection to *The Pink Opaque* and queerness. This fire signifies the destruction of his safe space, a place where he could explore his identity. In the final episode of the show, *The Pink Opaque* becomes much darker as Mr. Melancholy poisons Isabel and Tara, cuts out their hearts, and buries them alive to hide them in the Midnight Realm. When Owen watches this episode, it cuts to his head inside the burning TV set. He screams, “This isn’t my home! You’re not my father!” and that was the end of the show (Shoenbrun, 2024).



This moment reveals that, on some level, Owen is aware of his queerness, and he knows something is fundamentally wrong with his life as it currently exists. However, his fear of the unknown and of stepping outside the safety of the familiar (heterosexuality and being cisgender), holds him back. This fear is something that many queer people face, as they struggle to leave the comfort of the familiar and embrace authenticity. Owen's hesitation in leaving mirrors the common queer experience of being afraid of authenticity due to the fear of societal rejection or uncertainty.

The Visual Imagery of Queerness

Metaphors of queerness are scattered throughout the film. In the opening scene, young Owen walks under a colourful parachute, moving through stripes of pink, blue, purple, and white. After walking around, he eventually pauses at the pink stripe of the parachute and the scene ends. This shows how his queerness is apparent even though it is not yet explicitly named, and that Owen is navigating in a world where his identity is not fully understood, both by himself and those around him.



Lighting also plays a significant role in symbolizing queerness, The world of *The Pink Opaque* glows with bright neon lighting, which contrasts to the dull tones of the Midnight Realm. The glow of the TV screen becomes an important metaphor for Owen’s queerness illuminating from within. Additionally, the title of the show, *The Pink Opaque*, itself can be interpreted as a queer metaphor. The word pink has historically been linked to queerness. While the word opaque, meaning no light shining through, can resemble that in *The Pink Opaque* queerness is not hidden or transparent. Furthermore, the recurring quote “there is still time” is shown in the film and serves as a reminder to Owen and the audience (Shoenbrun, 2024). It reminds us that even if it feels like you missed your chance or that there is not enough time, there is always time to live authentically.



Maddy’s Transformation & Reaching Out

Years after leaving, Maddy re-emerges as Tara, symbolizing the reinvention and embracing of her queer identity. Maddy’s transformation into Tara can also be read as a metaphor for transness, or more broadly, the fluidity of identity. She sheds her old identity, burying her former self both literally and metaphorically, to become her true self. She explains

her journey of trying on new names and searching for herself. However, she came to a point where she had to bury her old self to emerge as her authentic self. Additionally, Tara represents the idea of chosen family as she returns to the Midnight Realm to rescue Owen, recognizing that he is stuck in a toxic, heteronormative world that Mr. Melancholy created. Her return emphasizes the resilience and solidarity within queer communities, highlighting how chosen family often steps in to provide support, acceptance, and the courage to embrace one's true self.

Collapse of Reality – The Final Breakdown

Maddy (now Tara) returns one final time, asking Owen to join her in the world of *The Pink Opaque*, where they can live as their true selves (Tara and Isabel). When Owen declines and Tara leaves without him, it sets off a breakdown in his sense of reality. Time accelerates, with decades passing in seconds, representing the way queerness, when suppressed, can cause life to feel as though it's slipping away. In one of the final scenes, Owen is shown wearing a dress, a flashback of him combining his memories of being Isabel and Owen to a moment where he felt more aligned with his true self. The dress symbolizes his queerness and the life he can embrace. His panic upon realizing that his life has passed by, with no chance to live authentically, mirrors the queer experience of lost time, as well as aging too quickly under the weight of societal rejection and trauma.



In the climax of the film, Owen is dying of old age, while still working at the arcade, apologizes to all the guests while having a panic attack. He runs to the washroom and slices open his chest and stomach, only to find that it is filled with the glow of TV static, which symbolizes his true self inside. In this scene, he experiences joy watching all of the memories of *The Pink Opaque*, however knocking on the door disrupts him and he stitches himself back together. The film ends with him continuously apologizing to everyone, without anyone acknowledging him. This represents his feelings of not belonging and that him experiencing anything out of the norm is a burden on others. Him not being acknowledged by the people in the arcade symbolizes how the heteronormative society does not care for his pain and struggle and despite this, Owen is still grasping for their validation.

Conclusion

Thus, *I Saw the TV Glow* offers an exploration of queerness through its metaphors of isolation, time distortion, and the questioning of reality. Maddy's transformation into Tara embodies the journey of self-acceptance and the reclamation of identity which is often necessary for those within the queer community. Her experience highlights the resilience required to break free from oppressive environments and embrace authenticity. Similarly, Owen's journey reflects the internal struggles many queer people face when conforming to societal expectations, often resulting in a sense of loss and alienation. The film's haunting imagery and themes serve as a stark reminder of the costs of suppressing one's true self. Ultimately, the film leaves a powerful message: *there is still time* to be authentic, and there will *always* be time.

References

Shoenbrun, J. (Director). (2024). *I Saw the TV Glow* [Film].