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I Saw the TV Glow

Dereck Daschke
Truman State University, ddaschke@truman.edu

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I Saw the TV Glow

Abstract

This is a film review of *I Saw the TV Glow* (2024), directed by Jane Schoenbrun.

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Author Notes

Dereck Daschke is a professor of Philosophy & Religion at Truman State University and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Particularly interested in the intersection among religion, psychology, and wellness, his academic work over more than two decades has analyzed the transformational breakdowns and creative buildups in the form of apocalypses, mysticism, new religious movements, psychedelics, the Bible, Bob Dylan, and, of course, film. He regularly teaches “Religion and Film” at Truman and has overseen a number of student research theses that have contributed to the conversation about just why it is that movies capture our meaning-making imaginations in the way they do.



I Saw the TV Glow (2024), dir. Jane Schoenbrun

Do we dream of the butterfly, or are we the butterfly's dream? Are we watching a television show, or are those characters watching us watching them? If the characters are living the lives we want, is it possible for us to live them too?

Jane Schoenbrun's *I Saw the TV Glow*, at turns chilling and ethereal, pulls layers of reality back one onion slice at a time, leaving the viewer with as many questions at the end as seventh-grader Owen (Justice Smith), who is drawn into the fantastic world of a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*-esque TV show called *The Pink Opaque* by an older schoolmate named Maddy (Brigitte Lundy-Paine). Over the course of a decade, Owen and Maddie's relationship to the show and each other takes surreal turns, blurring the lines between realities. Maddie, in particular, identifies the world of *The Pink Opaque* as being "more real" than anything else and uses the relationship between the two leads, Tara (Lindsey Jordan) and Isabel (Helena Howard), forged by a psychic connection to fight monsters, as a way of comprehending her relationship to Owen and to push him towards his own self-understanding.

To deflect any unwanted advances, Maddy makes clear that she likes girls, but then asks Owen if *he* likes girls. He answers, “I think I like TV shows.” He continues, “When I think about things like that, I feel like someone has taken a big ladle and scooped something out of me. I look and there’s nothing there.” Maddy replies, “Maybe you’re like Isabel, afraid of what’s inside you.” In fact, *I Saw the TV Glow* traces Owen’s difficult path towards authentically coming to terms with who he really is. But whereas Maddy’s engagement with *The Pink Opaque* is transformative and liberating in existential ways, for Owen the show is a way to bond with Maddy and to imagine a bigger and more powerful life than he is living. When, after a mysterious absence, Maddy presents the opportunity to actually live that life, he has to decide which is greater: his fears about what it means to embrace his true nature, or his trust that someone recognizes him for who he is and can get him where he needs to be. Notably, Owen and Maddy’s complex relationship to their identities and bodies makes for an overt trans allegory, reflecting director Jane Schoenbrun’s own gender journey, from straight-presenting male to identifying as “trans/non-binary.” Lundy-Paine also identifies as non-binary, and in Maddie’s re-imagining of *The Pink Opaque* as the *real* story of their lives battling monsters of the week and “the big bad,” Mr. Melancholy, Maddy is Tara and Owen is Isabel, replete with that character’s feminine shoulder strap dress. The returned Maddy is desperate for Owen to embrace who he truly is, before he suffocates and dies: a sentiment experienced by non-gender conforming people all the time, no doubt.

I Saw the TV Glow echoes horror/thriller classics like *Videodrome* (1983) and *Poltergeist* (1982) in interrogating the hold television has over people, asking, “If television is a medium, what is it mediating? What, exactly, is on the other side?” At the same time, it validates the obsession we might have with a given show growing up, especially if one’s “real life” is fraught with tension and violence, as both Maddy and Owen’s are. These narratives are the “myths in which we live,” to quote one of Carl Jung’s encounters with the archetypal realm in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961). They are the stories that are “more real than real,” and especially the

movies, books, and TV shows we hold on to from our childhoods. They forever represent a moment when we could imagine being our best selves vicariously through our favorite characters. Does the inevitable letdown of revisiting them as adults nullify what we took from them as young people? When we're confronted with the difference between how we remember things versus how they were, which one is "true"? And if we were given the chance to go live in the world as we remember it, would we? What would we give up if we did? If we didn't? *I Saw the TV Glow* effectively exploits our nostalgia and ambivalence about the role that television plays in shaping our emerging identities in adolescence and illuminates the way nostalgia keeps some trapped in a past that never happened but spurs others to find a world that matches their dreams.