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‘There is Still Time’ - Queer Discomfort in *I Saw the TV Glow*

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Abstract

Jane Schoenbrun's 2024 horror film *I Saw the TV Glow* engages with the aesthetics of transition, forgoing traditional layers of metaphor for an explicit trans narrative. I argue that the ways the film engages with the horror genre demonstrates an awareness of the principles of horror as defined by Noël Carroll while inverting the assumed purpose of the horror genre. Drawing upon the intersections of film studies and queer studies, I propose a viewing of *I Saw the TV Glow* in which the self-destructive nature of transition is centered, where the act of recognizing one's identity is seen through the lens of violence. This subversion of norms within horror is also used to explain the divisive reception the film received upon its Sundance debut, with its rejection of linear narrative paralleling its rejection of traditional gender structures.

Keywords

Queer Studies, Horror Studies, Contemporary Film, Transgender Fiction, LGBTQ+ Studies

The concept of the ‘egg crack’ in relation to transition is a common subject of online queer discourse. It acts as a simplified shorthand for the realization of one’s transgender identity that conveys the general feeling of this gendered epiphany and its effects on the pre-transition self. The idea also touches upon the infamous queer framing of being born in the wrong body, a relatively outdated way of thinking about trans bodies and our identities. What I have found most fascinating about the common usage of ‘cracking the egg’ is the implied violence that the phrase holds. If realizing that you are transgender is cracking your egg, this implies that accepting that label is a form of violence enacted upon the self, or at least some iteration of it. If the pre-transition self is the egg and accepting one’s identity is to violently crack the egg, the term ‘crack the egg’ is a form of simultaneous suicide and rebirth.

The positioning of transition as an act of violent self-recreation is bound to evoke a negative reaction in those with a negative perspective on trans identities and existence. Framing transition as an erasure of the self is a core tenet of contemporary transphobic rhetoric, assuming that this dismantling of the pre-transition self is solely an act of removal. But those who have experienced this recreation, this restructuring of the self in service to a new identity that is solely one’s own, know that matter cannot be created or destroyed. The act of transition involves a destruction of the past self, and the willing, often painful, formation of a new identity from it. Transition as self-reformation can be a difficult concept to capture, either in artwork or simply expressing it to a friend, to those without the lived experience of it. But none in recent memory has done so as well as Jane Schoenbrun in their 2024 film *I Saw the TV Glow*.

Over the course of this essay, I will argue for *I Saw the TV Glow*’s position as an exploration of not only the violence of transition, but also the more destructive violence of rejecting one’s own trans identity. I would like to note that my arguments here are not meant to be a systematic, empirical study. Rather, this should be read as a critical essay outlining the creative techniques employed in *I Saw the TV Glow*, along with a discussion of position of the film in relation to other notable works of horror and horror studies. This film is a deeply personal exploration of the emotions that surround an individual’s transition, as is my response to it. To approach this film in a way that denies subjectivity would do a disservice to both the film and my own emotions surrounding it. As such, this is meant to be a subjective, critical discussion of the film in relation to its depiction of gender transitions.

I Saw the TV Glow: A Summary

The film follows Owen, portrayed by Justice Smith, coming to terms with the strange unreality he finds himself in. We first meet Owen as a lonely teenager who struggles to connect with those around him.¹ He is introduced by Maddy (portrayed by Jack Haven) to a fictional television show known as *The Pink Opaque*, which follows two twinned spirits, Isabel and Tara, as they battle supernatural entities. Owen and Maddy bond over their love of the show and express an uncanny connection with the characters. Maddy eventually admits that they feel unwelcome in their hometown and tries to get Owen to run away with them. While Owen initially accepts, he makes the last-second choice to stay. Maddy vanishes into the night, leaving behind nothing but a burning television set and their VHS recordings of *The Pink Opaque*. The show is cancelled after six seasons.

Eight years later, Owen’s mother has passed away, leaving him to live with his emotionally distant father. Maddy reappears after their years-long absence, and takes Owen to a dive bar. There, they explain that they have spent the past years inside *The Pink Opaque*, telling Owen that he should feel that same sense of reality from the show. Shaken by Maddy’s

¹ Over the course of this essay I will refer to Owen using he/him pronouns and Maddy using they/them pronouns. While the former is referred to using she/her pronouns in certain instances, as is Maddy during their time in high school, this doesn’t reflect the self-dictated identities of the characters. As Owen rejects the realm of *The Pink Opaque* and Maddy chooses to carve out a path of their own (inspired by their actor’s own identity), I’ll refer to them with language that reflects these choices.

words, Owen returns home and attempts to enter the television by smashing his head into a television set, only to be stopped by his father who violently washes Owen following the incident.

Maddy once again meets with Owen at their high school to explain the supernatural elements of their existence. They believe that their true identities are not Owen and Maddy, but Isabel and Tara respectively, and that their anguished existence is a trap they have been placed in by the show's antagonist. After Maddy explains that the only way to return to the reality of *The Pink Opaque* is to bury themselves alive, Owen runs away, leaving Maddy to vanish again and never return.

Owen, having lost his main tether to reality, regresses into a more emotionally isolated adult. He gets married, starts a family, and eventually burns his recordings of *The Pink Opaque*. When rewatching the show on a streaming service, he sees it not as a mature supernatural adventure, but as a cheap children's show. The film ends twenty years after Owen last saw Maddy. While working at a children's arcade, Owen has a nervous breakdown and slices open his stomach to see what is inside, harkening back to an earlier conversation with Maddy. Inside, he sees *The Pink Opaque* playing and is overjoyed, but ends the film by sealing the wound and apologizing to his coworkers and guests.

Overview

Before proceeding, I would like to outline the arguments and key sources I will draw from over the course of this essay. First, I will outline the landscape that the film exists in, where horror is used as a genre to explore emotional and bodily discomfort, then expand upon this with a discussion of how Schoenbrun lent their own experiences and trans identity to this narrative structure. Schoenbrun has spoken on how the film is semi-autobiographical in nature, though they likely did not experience the kind of supernatural horrors that Owen faces (Barquin, 2024). Here, I will be framing *I Saw the TV Glow* as a radical exploration of candid trans identity through the language of horror, specifically highlighting how it uses the language of discomfort to craft a narrative that feels all-too-familiar to a transgender audience. *I Saw the TV Glow*, in doing this, becomes a reflection on queer discomfort or, more broadly, experiences of hyper-awareness spurred on through social and emotional isolation. This connection to the discomfort of transgender self-exploration can also create a mirrored discomfort within the cisgender audience, which I believe is a sign of the film's earnest expression. In not making any concessions to a cisgender audience, the film can often feel alien, which is a mood deliberately implemented by Schoenbrun for the purpose of producing this queer discomfort.

The discomfort, the horror, of transition

In arguing for this queering of discomfort within *I Saw the TV Glow*, I will be drawing on largely from Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror*, a book widely considered to be a seminal text in horror studies. Carroll argues for a form of affect theory in which horror's main purpose is to provoke a feeling of disgust, tying the genre to the body itself. Some may take umbrage with the choice to classify the film as a horror movie, but I will argue that its status as a horror film is affirmed through the structure of its narrative.² While the film does focus on physical aspects of gender, the discussions of identity within it are primarily focused on the abstract nature of the self.

I should note that I am not arguing that *I Saw the TV Glow* and its creative team has some unique perspective on horror, or that combining transgender experiences with genre fiction is a never-before-seen practice. Rather, I feel it is important to recognize when marginalized identities are presented without compromise, without self-censorship, in the

² Frankly, it is almost *more* astonishing that the film was a box-office success. Grossing close to \$5 alongside a successful presence on streaming services like Max makes a convincing case for funding future projects with this candid perspective on queerness (*The Numbers* 2025)

realm of fiction. *I Saw the TV Glow* is, to put it bluntly, a very rare case in which a transgender filmmaker was given near-limitless creative expression to depict their own trans identity in an experimental way.³ These instances of transgender liberation within the arts deserve their due analysis within the academic world, as they have the unique ability to catalyze not only future artistic endeavors, but future transitions of those questioning their gender identity. If any piece of art can contribute to someone finally ‘cracking their egg’, that is something worth celebrating and worth analyzing, not just so that the world can revel in that self-discovery, but so that future creations can understand how it provoked that reaction and go on to do the same.

Horror is a notably volatile genre. The points at which an individual draws a distinction between horror or thriller vary wildly. While it may seem like a minor detail, classifying *I Saw the TV Glow* as a horror film is vital to my subsequent analysis. In a short statement on genre, film scholar Edward Small wrote that different genres manifest ‘different aesthetic rules and restrictions, each addresses different cinematic problems and goals, and each is remarkably distinct, not merely because of subject matter, but because of structure’ (Small, 2013, 39). What they argue for here is a vision of genre not as a tool for audience interpretation, but as a kind of toolkit that a filmmaker employs in the process of creation. The intent to create a horror film, whether conscious or subconscious, guides the hand of the creator. When grappling with the queer identities depicted in *I Saw the TV Glow*, the position of the film within broader systems of genre plays a vital role in unravelling its deeper complexities. Scholars have long argued for the queer legacy of horror, seen in essay collections like *It Came from the Closet* (Vallesse, 2022) or films such as *Scream*, *Queen!* *My Nightmare on Elm Street* (Chimienti & Jensen, 2019). This is all to say that my framing of *I Saw the TV Glow* as a work of queer horror is not just due to its exploration of horror through queerness, but rather its depiction of horror as an inherently queer genre.

I Saw the TV Glow ties this discomfort to the body in transition, and this is most prominently visible in Maddy’s conversations with Owen in the latter half of the film. Maddy describes their feelings of disconnecting from reality following their sudden disappearance. Here, they describe their feelings to Owen while covered by a planetarium’s projections:

I had got out of that town. That place I knew would kill me if I stayed. But there was something still wrong. Wronger, even. Time wasn’t right. It was moving too fast. And then I was 19. And then I was 20. ... I said to myself, ‘This isn’t normal...This isn’t how life is supposed to feel’ (Schoenbrun).

Maddy’s descriptions of their disconnect from the world are grounded in a sense of misalignment between their self, their body, and the world around them. First, they tie their disillusionment to their immediate surroundings. The town they grew up in was slowly killing them, slowly draining them of the will to live. But even when they leave, the feeling persists. They begin to see their discomfort as coming not from their surroundings, but from their own identity. They recognize this, noticing feelings of discomfort and misalignment that are more internal. Time itself moves out of alignment with them, speeding up as reality trudges forward without regard for Maddy. Their body and the world around them are no longer aligned with their internal understanding of themselves. It is only upon this revelation that there is something physical and intangible that is affecting them that Maddy can get to the core of their problem: dysphoria.

Maddy’s dysphoria, when presented to both Owen and the audience, is meant to evoke a feeling of horror. We, much like Owen, become passive viewers, watching Maddy recount their journey of suicide, rebirth into *The Pink Opaque*, and return to the imagined world. We begin to recognize similarities between our own existence and Maddy’s

³ *I Saw the TV Glow* has also been placed in a variety of genres by critics and film festivals. As this argument pertains to its status as a horror film, I find it necessary to show why I believe this is the case.

experiences. Noël Carrol's *The Philosophy of Horror* provides an elegant solution by situating horror within a very specific realm of audience interaction. In studying the role of horror media of both page and screen, Carrol attempts to define the genre through the reaction it attempts to provoke within the audience. His writing dissects the etymology of the terms 'horror' and 'emotion,' tying them to the actions of shuddering and movement respectively (Carrol, 1990, p.24). If the emotion of horror is to create a shuddering movement in the audience, Carrol supposes that 'though it need not be the case that our hair must literally stand on end when we are art-horrified, it is important to stress that the original conception of the word connected it with an abnormal physiological state of felt agitation' (Carrol, 1990, p.24). If horror is meant to be tied to this body revulsion, either literally or psychologically, this gives a neat rationale for many tropes of the film genre. The screeching of violin strings, the darkness that cloaks a slasher, and the inhuman sprays of blood that are so tied to horror are explained as catalyzing forces of discomfort. As Carrol is primarily drawing from late-20th century slashers and Gothic literature, his work focuses on the visceral and physical. But when I apply this matrix to *I Saw the TV Glow*, the intended discomfort created by the film is rooted more in the socio-psychological than the physio-psychological. Rather than disrupting the audience's regular existence through infringing the body, the film chooses to poke and perforate the flimsy barriers of everyday existence.

At several key points in the film, the characters will repeat specific sentences structures with minor points of variation. One such instance is in reference to when *The Pink Opaque* airs: 'every Saturday from 10:30 p.m. to 11:00 p.m.' Owen speaks directly into the camera at multiple points in the film, breaking that veil between audience and art. In scenes like Maddy's monologue at the planetarium, characters will speak in head-on, unbroken chunks. These moments serve as infractions on the supposed normalcy of the world. We, the audience, know we are not sitting in the planetarium, listening to a childhood friend trying to convince us of a supernatural foe. But if we are primed with the same feelings that Maddy, Owen, and even Jane Schoenbrun have experienced, we begin to feel as if part of us is inside *I Saw the TV Glow*. This is not to say the film is not engaged with the physical as a source of horror. There's the burying-alive of Tara and Isabel within *The Pink Opaque*, Owen smashing his head through his television set, and his self-disembowelment at the end of the film. However, these are all the result of the social horrors that the story is primarily engaged with. Due to Owen and Maddy's connection to the show, Owen tries to enter the television to leave his reality, and Owen's feelings of discomfort cause him to cut his chest open. The physical, for the characters and viewers of *I Saw the TV Glow*, is bound to the psychological. Schoenbrun takes the tenuous and tumultuous relationship between the body and the mind, then applies the modes and methods of horror to it, making for a unique vision of horror that speaks to their own lived experiences.

While this section has been primarily focused on Maddy's character, I do feel it is important to highlight its application towards the Owen as a primary focus of the narrative. These scenes, meant to provoke the audience's discomfort and coax out resonant emotions around gender, are also directed at Owen. We, the viewer, occupy the same role as Owen when Maddy describes their experiences with this unspooling reality. Within Noël Carroll's ideas of horror as a provocation of bodily reactions – and the psychological bend that this film lends to that relationship – there are two instances of this at play: Maddy with their audience of Owen, and the movie itself with its audience of the viewer. This depiction of dysphoria as something that is itself able to provoke horror leads into how transition itself becomes an act of horror, infringing upon standardized constructions of the body and its norms in service of actualizing a new self.

Transition as an act of horror

The status of *I Saw the TV Glow* as a piece of transgender horror cinema can be gleaned through fairly basic visual cues. The opening scene has Owen walking under a pink, white, and blue tarp that resembles the transgender pride flag. In another scene, Owen states 'What

if I really was someone else? Someone beautiful and powerful', paralleling lingering feelings of gender exploration. You can even defer to Schoenbrun's own word-of-god interviews on the subject. However, I wish to take a deeper look at this and discuss how the discomfort outlined above leads into the movie's exploration of transitioning as horror, as well as how it depicts repression as a sinister twin to transition.

In 'How Do Gender Transitions Happen?' from *Transgender Marxism*, Jules Gleeson attempts to decipher what exactly is considered a gender transition. Their writing tackles how we imagine the act of transitioning, and offers two contrasting solutions. The first places transition within the interaction between social expectations and one's gendered presentation, and the other as a result of trans communities creating a form of social bonds over a shared identity (Gleeson, 2021, p.71). Their discussion here ultimately questions whether the definition of transition should fall within the broader (mostly cisgender) culture or within trans communities themselves. The latter seems to be the more appealing option, placing the power of definition within the marginalized. However, she does note that trans community can inflict many of the same harms of policing presentation that social systems do, though without the institutional power of something like the 'doctors of John Hopkins' (Gleeson, 2021, 79). In imagining Owen's journey as his recognition and rejection of his trans identity, it is important to understand where transition does or does not occur within the narrative. Under Gleeson's definition, Owen's transition would occur within the realm of the marginalized. We glimpse such a place in his interactions with Maddy and the dive bar they take him to. But outside of these glimpses of a better world, Owen is stifled by the world around him. To understand how *I Saw the TV Glow* imagines transition within its narrative, we can look to the character of Maddy for a guide.

While there is not a literal moment of transition in *I Saw the TV Glow*, it is made fairly explicit that the false reality (Owen's world) and *The Pink Opaque* represent pre-transition and post-transition life respectively. Maddy has crossed this imagined precipice of transition by entering *The Pink Opaque*, having returned transformed to offer Owen a path into the show. Burying themselves alive and allowing themselves to be killed within this reality, Maddy exits the imagined reality of Owen's world. The moment of transition does not occur within a broader social context nor within the creation of a community. *I Saw the TV Glow* instead imagines transitioning as an act of violence towards the self. When Maddy describes how they exited this false reality, they emphasize how it was an isolated act, save for paying an unwitting accomplice to bury them alive. Their dialogue focuses on the visceral aspects of this transition (once again drawing from the planetarium scene) in their plea toward Owen to escape the false reality:

I pissed and I shit my pants, and I forced my mouth to produce whatever saliva I could muster just so I'd have something to drink. I screamed as loud as I could for help, and I apologized for the whole thing. I begged God for someone to come along and save me. I tried and tried to claw my way out. (Schoenbrun)

Maddy's exit from the false reality places them inside Carroll's vision of horror. Their words evoke the visceral, bodily fluids reprocessed and re-harvested to sustain their dying body. This is, in essence, violence toward their pre-transition self. While this is a metaphorical act within the context of the narrative, the same logic can be applied towards real-life transition. I do not mean to imply that transition is any form of self-destructive masochism, rhetoric seen in regressive transphobic circles. Rather, that unmaking the past self in service of transition is an essential part of forming a new identity. The space that the pre-transition self-occupies must be freed up for the new identity to take its place.

Why transition? Or why we undergo horror

This does raise the question of why someone would undergo transition if it is, as I argue here, an act of horror. This is a line of thought that crops up primarily in cisgender circles. Here,

transition is framed as a kind of loss, a removal without replacement (McGuire et al., 2016). It can be difficult for someone without the desire to transition to comprehend why someone would desire to unmake their past identity. While it is unlikely that my arguments here can fully elucidate why we desire to transition to an alien audience, I do want to paint a picture of why transitions occur by using the language of horror. As horror and transitioning play on similar emotions, the reasons that we engage with horror (and grow to better understand ourselves from it), can ideally provide a framework to explain why transition is desirable.

If horror, as Carrol supposes, has the goal of creating feelings of uneasiness and wrongness within the audience, one may question why it has received such popular attention. Emotions that we ascribe negative connotations to are presumed to be something an individual would avoid. Yet horror continues to be a thriving genre, seemingly in defiance of the inherent discomfort of inherent to it. This same dissonance can be seen in transitioning. The images commonly associated with gender transition involve arduous surgeries, endless legal labyrinths, and bodily changes that are often equated to a 'second puberty' (Hedian, 2024). Yet as with horror, people continue to engage with this discomfort willingly, and to great personal benefit. As such, examining the benefits of transitioning discomforts as horror-adjacent will help explain why those discomforts are compelling.

Isabel Pinedo's 'Recreational Terror' analyzes the willing engagement with the negative emotions associated with horror. As Pinedo puts it, the creation of horror media involves the transformation of natural aspects of the world into monstrous counterparts (Pinedo, 1997, 26). Pinedo espouses the value of horror in its limited existence: 'The screen constitutes the spatial frame on which a film is projected. It marks off a bounded reality, one that needs not conform strictly to lived experience' (Pinedo, 1997, p.27). Horror becomes a place to willingly engage in all of the terrors we would otherwise be unwilling to face directly. The act of observing horror becomes a communal act, with the finite timespan of a film and the public setting of a movie theater serving as a kind of safety guards for these negative experiences. Pinedo's arguments frame horror as a kind of consensual dip into the waters of fear. While the sensory effects that Carrol describes may linger in the viewer, an audience assumes the goal will be to exit the horror and return to supposed normalcy. And, much like with gender transitions, placing oneself within that discomfort can draw out a more ideal version of the self, one that understands the struggle required to exist in their current state.

However, key to Pinedo's arguments is the eventual cessation of the self-imposed horror. It is a temporary act; the willing party will return to the 'real world' once the movie ends, the book is finished, or the haunted house closes. Transitioning, in most instances, is not a temporary act. As I have described above, it is a destruction of the past self in service of creating a new one. It is an act of defiance, one that replaces a restrictive, imposed identity with a freeing, self-defined one. The indefinite timeline of transition and the finite timeline of horror would seemingly make them incompatible. I argue that *I Saw the TV Glow* asks us to question this idea. What happens when we seek to pull ourselves deeper and deeper into the waters of fear, until we ultimately drown?

The labor of masculinity: Owen's rejection

Following Maddy's return to Owen's reality, they describe how they left this world and returned to the world of *The Pink Opaque*, weaving a story of agonizing transfiguration that's difficult for them to relay. Despite the pain they endured in returning to *The Pink Opaque*, Maddy feels that this was the right thing to do. While burying themselves alive was painful, it was the only way to return to *The Pink Opaque*. When Maddy offers Owen the chance to do the same, he rejects them and never sees Maddy again, saying he told himself that 'she was an escaped mental patient. That the whole thing had been some deranged fantasy she'd constructed' (Schoenbrun, 2024). He not only rejects the existence of *The Pink Opaque*, but the very reality of Maddy's return. Instead, he chooses to exist in a world that is painful for him to live in, a clear parallel to gender dysphoria. In a classic horror narrative, the tribulations of dysphoria would be akin to Jason Vorhees or Michael Myers. That is to say,

dysphoria – an intangible concept – takes up the role of the central antagonist. It is the silent, stalking killer that creeps through the narrative, ever-closer to killing off our protagonists unless they find a way to stop or slow it.

What separates this from the traditional horror narrative is Owen's rejection of escape. The act of freeing himself from this false reality is a violent one, and one which he does not want to do. He tells Maddy that this world is his home despite his feelings of isolation. Owen repeatedly describes himself as an observer to his own life, as if watching it through a television screen. Pinedo's matrix for understanding horror tells us this is a way for him to understand the systems around him, save for the fact that Owen does not want to leave. Rather than existing within horror with the goal of re-entering the world as a realized version of himself, Owen chooses the lingering discomfort of his world in favor of the painful liberation of *The Pink Opaque*. Living with dysphoria is a self-destructive act, seen in how Owen slowly deteriorates over the years as his feelings of doubt fester within his body. But in the same measure, accepting one's trans identity is self-destructive, literally so within *I Saw the TV Glow*. For many transgender people, transition is an act of heavy bodily and social alteration. We undergo surgeries, form new communities, and sever connections with our old selves. Owen does not wish to unmake himself to be freed from this reality. The prospect of this radical self-transfiguration is less tolerable to him than a life of dysphoric discomfort.

Owen has weighed his options – either undergo a painful process of metamorphosis or live in a constant state of disconnect and ennui – and chosen to isolate himself rather than undergo a transformation. While transitioning would offer the promise of self-actualization, he's doubtful that such a possibility can exist for him. He has effectively chosen to remain closeted, or at the very least deny his own identity. This rejection of one's trans identity is often a side effect of the societal pressures and stigmas around transitioning. Abigail Thorn discussed this in her 2021 video essay *Identity: A Trans Coming Out Story*. Thorn, prior to this video, had not publicly transitioned and had built a social and professional identity as a male political philosopher. Her video explores the emotional consequences of this rejection, how forcing herself to repress a feminine identity placed her in a cycle of self-imposed agony. By her own account, she felt a moral imperative to carry out life her life as a man, even if she felt that it would kill her (Thorn, 2021). She equates living in a masculine identity to the role of a soldier. Describing the supposed duty she had towards this way of life, Thorn says she thought that 'I cannot leave this war! It's impossible. It's not allowed.' So I just kept on pretending, because it seemed to make everyone happy, at least. I mean, it's a hell of a role' (Thorn, 2021). Masculine expression, in the words of Thorn, is treated as an act of labor, with the implication that feminine expression would be its non-labored counterpart. This is not to say that Thorn's expression of femininity is without effort, but rather that it would be effort willfully exerted rather than coerced. While the experiences of a fictional teenager and a real-life British philosopher cannot be equated, elements of Thorn's sentiments also appear in *I Saw the TV Glow*. Owen only finds joy in *The Pink Opaque* and his connection with Maddy, and even those joys are dubious in the face of his lingering discomfort. Once Maddy disappears for the second time, his narration describes how he chooses to grow up and become a real man, starting a family of his own and getting a flatscreen television. Aligning himself with masculine ideals, Owen is rejecting the self-determined form of identity that Maddy offers. *I Saw the TV Glow* positions transition within the self, an internal act of alteration that washes away one's pre-transition identity. His rejection of escape from his reality is his way of affirming his presence in the soldier's role described by Thorn.⁴ To give up the soldier's duty would be an act of violence towards himself. Instead, he trudges

⁴ It is notable that, following Owen's choice to embrace his world of discomfort, the film primarily centers the labor he performs. Whether it is a job at a movie theater, entertainment center, or the purchasing new products for his home, Owen begins to experience the world through labor rather than exploring his identity.

forward, unchanging in his self-denigrating behaviors as Maddy returns to *The Pink Opaque*. The reality of transgender existence is not as simple as traditional horror narrative structures. It is a constant battle within the self and within the world the self creates. Owen believes, perhaps rightfully, that there is no place of comfort for him in the world. His feelings of dysphoria will haunt him in this reality, and the destruction of his old identity is too terrifying of a concept for him to attempt to leave. *The Pink Opaque* and all of its promise of self-actualization become nothing more than a dreamlike vision. For the first time in his life, *The Pink Opaque* is truly just a TV show.

Thorn's discussion of masculinity as labor mirror Owen's feelings around his life in this imagined world. Owen's role within the fear and discomfort cultivated by the narrative is to become its victim and propagator. When given the chance to exit this world of torment, Owen repeatedly rejects the opportunity. To him, there is a moral value to weathering the trials of this world. While Owen finds the possibility of a post-transition existence compelling, he does not allow it to be anything more than a thought. When engaging with this possible future, he only frames it in hypothetical statements. 'What if I really was someone else?' lingers as one of his most haunting lines. For the briefest of moments, he allows himself to embrace this potential future, but even here he cannot imagine it as a reality. Thorn's allegory of the soldier's duty aligns nicely with this sentiment. A military role asks an individual to exchange their bodily and mental well-being for service to a nation. Conservative perspectives around military service hold that patriotism is the catalyzing force for someone joining the military.⁵ The overall stability of the nation is valued higher than the well-being of an individual's body or mind. Willingly going against military service or a lack of patriotism in general is imagined as an act of violence towards a nation. By not sacrificing their own body, an individual's lack of action is interpreted as action against the state. Forsaking one's personal feelings towards gender identity in favor of performing a socially accepted role parallels this kind of devotion. Rather than a specific nation, this attitude seeks to uphold cultural norms at the expense of individual expression. While transition or denial of it is a less tactile act than military service, both of them position the moral worth of the act within the individual. As Schoenbrun places the act of transition within a person, the desire to serve in the military is often fostered from a young age. Social norms around how a person should operate and in what manner they may navigate the world drill in these edicts before an individual can realize they are transgender. Upon having this realization within themselves, the cultural forces of normalization encourage a comfortist approach. Deviation from the norms of being would be considered an act of violence against the stability of broader society. For someone to exist as transgender is warped into a form of social violence, a sentiment echoed through contemporary reactionary perspectives on queer people (Yurcaba, 2022). Within *I Saw the TV Glow*, Owen becomes the enforcer of his own imprisonment. He is the one placing the moral value of transition upon himself, his beliefs keeping him from making any sort of radical change that would question cisnormative cultural structures. Rather than allowing Owen to recognize his difference from the world, his instilled desires for normalcy encourage him to take up this soldier's duty.

Cracking (and uncracking) the egg

To confront the internal enemy, in which the observer recognizes themselves as part of what they fear, involves the destruction of the self. Owen's sentiments are, unfortunately, a common one. Internalized transphobia as well as institutional structures make the prospect of transition a terrifying one. When one denies themselves their own identity, this brings into question the moment of the egg crack. Traditional understanding of the term implies that the egg cracks when someone realizes they are trans. What does that mean, however, in Owen's situation? His egg could be considered to have cracked early in his life when first watching *The Pink Opaque* with Maddy. Rather than emerging as a new being as the egg crack would

⁵ See: *Patriotism or Paychecks: Who Believes What About Why Soldiers Serve* by Ronald Krebs (2020).

imply, Owen suppresses these emotions and spends the rest of his life in a battle with himself. The act of cracking Owen's egg is not a singular moment. Schoenbrun is rejecting the simple utility of trans self-actualization as an 'A-ha!' moment. Instead, his egg is cracked and repaired multiple times over the course of the narrative. His struggle to accept his trans identity does not follow a linear pattern. Rejecting his own identity, Owen becomes an example of the fluid nature of identity within the self and broader society. There is no moment where he switches from cisgender to transgender. There is beauty in being transgender, and there is horror in equal measure. Assuming that everyone will have a linear path towards finding their true self is short-sighted. In 2016, a piece by writer Jennifer Coates made the rounds in trans internet circles. In it, she describes how she is transgender and chooses not to transition, describing her feelings around this decision:

It turns out transition isn't the answer for everyone – to suggest otherwise is narrow-minded and proscriptive. Because for some transwomen, femininity can feel asymptotic – the closer you get, the more you feel you can never make it. (Coates, 2016)

Her feelings here mirror Owen's choice to not follow Maddy into *The Pink Opaque*. He may find the idea of leaving a world he is alienated from appealing, but he feels distant from the possibility of finding peace. Having lived his entire life isolated from the world, Owen has no metric for what it would feel like to truly feel like himself. Coates notes how her desire to be seen as feminine often exacerbated her own feelings of dysphoria. Within his reality, Owen's attempts to find a place for himself are met with further isolation and rejection from the world. His life within a world of horror has left him unable to see a path towards freedom. In rejecting Maddy's offer of escape, Owen's egg has cracked. Yet he chooses to put the egg back together rather than emerge into a new, painful world.

Owen, as outlined earlier, chooses not to recognize his existence as Isabel within *The Pink Opaque* as something truly possible, treating it only as hypothetical. But while Owen sees this kind of transition as innately tied to socialization, real-world transitions are more closely tied to an individual's own understanding of themselves. While transitioning and its related affirmation can involve socialization, it is not dictated by socialization. But acknowledging this more fluid, less tangible idea of transitioning would compromise Owen's isolation within his false reality. So instead, he rebuilds his egg every time it has cracked. After finally rejecting Maddy's offer to return to *The Pink Opaque*, he says 'It's not real if I don't think about it'. Repeating this to himself, it becomes a mantra that illuminates why he takes the actions he takes throughout the film. While he recognizes that there is a self-defined element to transitioning, he chooses to push it to the periphery of his mind. Owen attempts to make this potential unreal, isolating himself not just from the rest of society, but from the truest parts of himself. The dysphoria-as-villain framing of this story sinks its teeth in here. The potential freedom that transitioning presents is rejected in favor of a life of constant discomfort. The egg has cracked, yes, but that does not mean a person is free.

With *I Saw the TV Glow*'s subversion of the finite nature of horror, it positions itself to be intimately relatable to a transgender audience and potentially alienating to a cisgender one. Returning to Pinedo's idea of horror as a restricted exposure to real-world phenomena, being transgender gives one an understanding of what a deep immersion in this willing discomfort would look like. To draw a comparison between other horror films, the *Saw* movies draw upon our own experiences with pain and accentuate it, elevating our prior experiences in this restricted environment. A transgender viewer will likely have a similar experience when watching *I Saw the TV Glow*; they recognize their own experiences portrayed in this heightened reality. While horror has certainly taken the route of metaphor to explore transgender existence before, the direct confrontation of horrors from within takes center stage in *I Saw the TV Glow*.

This candid exploration of the transgender experience and the egg crack casts off traditional trends of cinema. The undoing of traditional structures can offer an explanation for the film's mixed reception. While a critic's enjoyment of a film should not be considered as indicative of objective quality, the deviations from broader horror structures might explain the unease some critics felt in response to the film. In a review following a Sundance screening, Nicolas Rapold described a lack of cohesion within *I Saw the TV Glow*, arguing that 'there's the awed sense of a blueprint or roadmap that is insisted upon without entirely being executed and fulfilled ... a film of sequences and moments more than a fully [realized] whole' (Rapold, 2024). Rapold's primary criticism is aimed at the seemingly absent throughlines in the film, regarding it as an attempt at grand storytelling without proper structure. Speaking to a concrete example of these, several scenes follow Owen walking from one place to another or passively going about his life while a mellow song plays in the background. These instances read more like music videos than pieces of a narrative as we would imagine it.⁶ Rapold is arguing that these pull the viewer away from the emotional thrust of the narrative. This is a valid critique under the traditional structure of horror as outlined by Pinedo. Owen spends the majority of the film attempting to remain static in the world. He resists change, whether it is in the form of running away with Maddy or entering *The Pink Opaque*. The horror here is not something that the audience attempts to escape or even can escape. Rapold's criticisms are correct; there is no resolution of Owen's struggles here. However, that is the point of his journey throughout the film. The audience can find understanding, whether through personal experience or through narrative empathy, for people recognizing their transgender identities. The process of transition requires the undoing of social norms as well as the self. The self-destruction that Maddy proposes to Owen mirrors the film's destruction of narrative norms. To achieve a truly resonant image of transition in the face of self-doubt and internalized transphobia, Schoenbrun simultaneously unmakes the horror genre to suit the needs of this story.

What horror is, is not, and can be

In my arguments on whether *I Saw the TV Glow* is part of the horror genre, I argue that the film is portraying transgender existence as an act of horror both in transition and self-rejection, but it also bucks the assumed requirement of horror being a finite engagement with the horrific. The film engages with Carrol's argument that horror is tied to discomfort as well as Pinedo's argument that horror is tied to temporality. Returning to Carrol's *The Philosophy of Horror*, he compares the aversion to disgust that humans have to our awe of Godlike entities. Both of these promote a strong emotional reaction to forces beyond our comprehension, with the passage arguing the following.

The relation of the repulsive in horror to this sense of awe is that the morbidly unnatural is what it takes to trigger it. So, we seek the morbidly unnatural in horror literature in order to experience awe, a cosmic fear with a visionary dimension that corresponds to instinctual, human views of the universe. (Carrol, 1990, 163)

His arguments here align with Pinedo's perspective on horror as a vessel for safe exploration. However, Pinedo recognizes that the majority of these works are meant to create a palatable image of horror for a wider audience. General audiences will reject a story that offers a bleak image of reality with little room for salvation. Carrol's analysis argues against the idea that horror only exists as a temporary reprieve, arguing that we seek a safe venue for this exploration because we are in awe of these systems that surround us. In *I Saw the TV Glow*,

⁶ The comparison to music videos is not without a basis in reality; Schoenbrun also directed the music video for Lucy Darcus's *Night Shift*. Considering that music video was released within a year of this film, and Darcus's longtime collaborator Phoebe Bridgers appears in the film, it's reasonable to assume these two projections influenced each other.

the experience of discovering one's own identity resists concrete definition. In my own experience, I have struggled to articulate my own feelings around my transitions. In telling Owen's story, the film cannot offer a traditional narrative conclusion because his identity is so deeply mired in self-doubt. Transgender existence can be drawn from Carrol's structure of horror, the desire to provoke an intense emotional reaction within an audience, but its amorphous nature separates it from Pinedo's ideas around finite durations of exposure to those horrors. Were the film to extend beyond its current runtime, Owen would likely have dozens more moments of egg cracking and un-cracking. This is simply the nature of trans identities. There is no set path towards self-actualization with no particular end point for one to reach. It is the constant act of self-examination that one undergoes both before and after various forms of transition.

I Saw the TV Glow ends with the image of Owen walking through an arcade while apologizing to others for an outburst he had. By then, he is withered and weary; actor Justice Smith was covered in makeup to give him a haggard appearance. In ending the film on a picture of Owen essentially recanting his desire to escape, one's initial assumption would point towards a nihilistic vision of transgender futures. Owen, even at his most emotionally raw points, returns to the lingering discomfort of this world-as-dysphoria. There is certainly a measure of truth to this reading of Owen's story, with his general narrative arc depicting the denial of identity that many transgender people have. But once the raised heart rates and feelings of nausea that Carrol describes begin to fade, another, more hopeful image comes to mind. While walking down his street, Owen passes a chalk drawing that has been shown partially throughout the film. In a wide shot, it is revealed that there is chalk writing that reads 'There is still time'. *I Saw the TV Glow* does end on a dour note, with Owen throwing himself perhaps deeper than he has ever been into the false promises of this reality. For nearly thirty years, he has rejected the promise of liberation with Maddy. Yet the film itself offers a response to him: 'There is still time'. There is no diegetic explanation to this chalk message, its presence seemingly otherworldly. The writing, therefore, can be read as a message from Jane Schoenbrun herself. Even though Owen may not see a path towards self-acceptance and a life as his true self, there is still time for him to find it. In positioning the act of transition within the individual rather than within social structures, Schoenbrun makes the act of transition atemporal, much like the structure of the film itself. Owen may never accept his own identity and enter the world of *The Pink Opaque*. But, even as he rejects every glimpse of freedom and marches through his soldier's duty, the possibility for escape still remains.

I have been an Owen in the past, perfectly willing to cast off my own identity in favor of a conformist lifestyle. The promise of lingering discomfort, as seen in *I Saw the TV Glow* can feel more promising than the internal and external struggles of transition. But even in denying one's own identity, there is always the chance to find the self within. *I Saw the TV Glow* masterfully executes on the fundamental aspects of horror while repurposing its results to give a candid expression of the egg crack. It calls into question the societal image of a linear transition, warping time and self-image into the knotted jumble that results from a lifetime of self-transfiguration. Most triumphantly, it serves as a reminder of how the horrors of transition can be survived. Even if Owen rejects the freedom Maddy offers, the possibility to change will always remain. Within the film, the horror is not a singular monster or evil entity, but in the slow erosion of life that a self-imposed life of dysphoria can create. There is no path towards complete escape from the horrors that transition may create, but *I Saw the TV Glow* paves a path towards a complete self in spite of these pains. Owen is correct in his assumption that transition or isolation both involve a lifetime of pain from the world and within. But even if he chooses blissful ignorance, there is always the chance for him to exit his reality and enter a new one. *The Pink Opaque* promises a world that is more real and tangible than his own, and *I Saw the TV Glow* reminds us that the lingering discomfort of dysphoria will not be forever. For as long as one breathes, there is always still time.

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