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"How Could any One Relationship Ever Possibly be Fulfilling?": Bisexuality, Nonmonogamy, and the Visualization of Desire in the Cinema of Gregg Araki

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[p.102]

Abstract

The cinematic oeuvre of Gregg Araki is populated with invocations of bisexuality. Many of Araki's characters desire people of more than one gender and their desires are routinely represented in ways that resist the trend of bisexual erasure within media. This article examines the techniques through which bisexuality is thus rendered intelligible within a fatalistically monosexist signifying economy. This article argues that Araki's cinema often visualizes bisexuality within this economy by yoking bisexual desire to visual representations of nonmonogamy. Although these representations render some images of bisexual desire visible, they also preclude others from visibility and buttress bisexual stereotypes related to fulfilment, infidelity, and excess. Although the yearning for representation, like many of Araki's characters, may be inexorably doomed, this article concludes that the techniques through which Araki invokes bisexuality are indicative of the manifold ways in which monosexuality's sovereignty in the visual thwarts bisexuality's cinematic intelligibility.

Gregg Araki and bisexuality

The cinematic oeuvre of Gregg Araki is populated with invocations of bisexuality. Many of Araki's characters desire people of more than one gender and their desires are routinely represented in ways that resist the trend of bisexual erasure within media. This article examines the techniques through which bisexuality is thus rendered intelligible within a American filmmaker Gregg Araki's work is known for featuring aliens, the apocalypse, and Los Angeles. Teenagers who take drugs and have sex. Soundtracks reverberating with the exclamatory brashness of postpunk and the sensual pulse of shoegaze. Brutal violence, cults, and surprise attacks. Valley girls and stoners. Californian teenage vernacular peppered with creative vulgarities. Boredom, apathy, and recklessness. Stories without endings. Chain-smoking and drinking. Teen suicide. Young cinephiles who make films. And finally—importantly—characters who desire people of more than one gender.

With a career spanning from 1987 to the present day, Araki's recurrent engagements with characters possessing these kinds of desires throughout his oeuvre marks a core investment in bisexuality by Araki as an auteur. Here I am using the [p.103] term 'bisexuality' in its broadest sense to discuss what bisexual activist Robyn Ochs (2009) calls, "the potential to be attracted, romantically and/or sexually, to people of more than one [gender], not necessarily

at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree" (p. 9). Araki's engagements with bisexuality are noteworthy in their recurrence, positioning, structuring, and, uniquely, in their readability. Araki himself has hinted toward this aspect of his cinema saying in 1999 "polymorphous sexuality is interesting to me" (Bowen & Araki, 1999, p. 30), in 2005 "my movies are always about outsiders and amorphous sexuality" (Chonin & Araki, 2005, para. 11), and in 2011, "my earlier movies are sort of about that idea of sexuality [being] flexible and not black and white" (Murray & Araki, 2011), para. 16). Araki also described *The Doom Generation* (Sperling & Araki, 1995) as having "a bisexual edge" (Lippe & Wood, 1994, p. 20) and his tagline for Kaboom (Caucheteux, Sperling, & Araki, 2010) was "a bisexual *Twin Peaks* in college" (Muñoz, 2011, para. 3).[1]

This trend within Araki's work has inspired discussion in a variety of film theory texts, most extensively in Kylo-Patrick R. Hart's (2010) *Images for a Generation Doomed: The Films and Career of Gregg Araki* and in a chapter of Justin Vicari's (2011) *Male Bisexuality in Current Cinema: Images of Growth, Rebellion and Survival*. The latter text argues that Araki represents "true" or "authentic" bisexuality in contrast with the "pretence" or "pose" of bisexual stereotype (Vicari, 2011, p. 51). Vicari (2011) understands the representations of these characters' vulnerabilities as positive correctives to images of "bad," "privileged," and "pleasure seeking" bisexual characters (pp. 54–55). The shortcomings of this approach lie in its commitment to the subjective and unquantifiable understanding of authentic, good, or positive bisexuality. Although there is certainly discussion to be had regarding Araki's engagement with bisexual stereotype, Vicari's argument elides an analysis as to how these different kinds of representations function and are structured. Vicari's praise of representations he deems positive and condemnation of those he deems negative results in a lack of scrutiny of the former and a lack of nuance in his analysis of the latter. Hart's (2010) analysis is broader than Vicari's, considering Araki's oeuvre from 1987 to 2007, with regular allusion to its queer and bisexual themes.

Hart's analysis, however, is similarly plagued by an approach of value judgement that motivates him to claim that "[b]y the end of the 1990s, Araki's later works had become virtually irrelevant with regard to breaking new ground in cinematic representations of non-heterosexuals" (Sperling & Araki, 1997, p. 11). Hart's assertion that *Nowhere* and *Splendor* were "the "straightest" creations of Araki's career up to the times of their release" (Broadbent, Jones, & Araki, 1999, p. 52) is predicated upon accusations that the former "fails to make any

sort of compelling statement about nonheterosexuality" (p. 57), and of the latter being an "elusive treatment of such a sexually charged situation … a relatively wholesome romantic comedy" (Sperling & Araki, 1997, p. 60). Hart's perception of *Nowhere*'s lack of queer sensibility and his [p.104] dissatisfaction at *Splendor*'s (Broadbent et al., 1999) potentially queer situations 'unexploited' subsumes these films into a theoretical space of 'not-queer-enoughness,' while also belying these later films' bisexual elements (which I address later). In a departure from Vicari and Hart, I find Araki's recurrent investment in bisexuality (found throughout his oeuvre in albeit different ways and within different generic contexts) noteworthy, not because his body of work provides 'positive' or 'radical' representations of bisexuality (such claims are difficult to quantify), but because of the way in which Araki's films continually render bisexuality intelligible within a context in which bisexuality is so often erased.

An epistemological investigation into the 'achievement' of bisexual representation is more fruitful than a methodology predicated on value judgement. The former is also useful in illuminating how tools of knowledge production, sexual signification, visualization, and temporality work to render some images of bisexuality intelligible and preclude others from intelligibility. The structuring of these bisexualities and the epistemological functions they perform speak to more than Araki's oeuvre, but to fundamental questions of bisexual cinematic representationality.

Fulfilment and the unknowable aim

Araki's first feature *Three Bewildered People in the Night* (Araki, 1987) provides the director's earliest engagement with questions of bisexuality through the characters of Craig (John Lacques) and David (Mark Howell), who express attraction toward men and women at different points during the film. In one poignant scene Craig, who is currently in a relationship with a woman, speaks to his gay-identifying friend David about bisexuality, commenting, "I was thinking the other day how terrible it would be to be genuinely bisexual. I mean to actually be 50/50 split down the middle attracted to both sexes. How could any one relationship ever possibly be fulfilling?" (Araki, 1987) Craig's comments not only reveal his character's personal anxieties vis-a-vis bisexual desire but also serve as an apposite theoretical point of departure to address how bisexuality can be conceptualized. Here, Craig figures

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bisexual desire as "terrible" because of the alleged inability of someone with such desires to be sexually fulfilled in a relationship.

To anatomize this musing, it is useful to consider Clare Hemmings's (2002) writing on the function of sexed and gendered object choice within different structures of sexual desire. Hemmings contends that heterosexuality and homosexuality— the dominant monosexualities—are structured and signified in relation to single-gender-object-choice. The dominant monosexualities thus carry a knowable object of desire in their symbolic invocation as well as purporting a self whose desire will be fulfilled through the attainment of that gendered object. In the context of Craig's dialogue, one can contend that the polyvalence of bisexuality's gendered aims (or perhaps its total lack thereof) fails to signify the promise of fulfilment that characterizes the knowable single aim of monosexuality.

[p.105] Craig's assertion that 'genuine bisexuality' would constitute a '50/50' split between men and women posits a binarist understanding of bisexuality as 'equal' attraction toward men and women (a definition that has been resisted in much bisexual theory and activism). This definition is not only binarist in its invocation of a gender binary, but also the heterosexual-homosexual binary that is assumed to make up the two '50's.' The underlying assumption here is that if one was to assert two unequal percentages of desire towards two gendered objects, this would not constitute 'genuine' bisexuality but a monosexual orientation determined by which percentage is higher.

This positioning of 'genuine' bisexuality as an equal composition of heterosexuality and homosexuality speaks to Craig's inability to conceptualize sexual desire outside of the heterosexual-homosexual binary. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990/ 2008) writes that in the west at the turn of the 20th century, "every given person … was now considered necessarily assignable … to a homo- or a hetero-sexuality, a binarized identity … that left no space in the culture exempt from the potent incoherences of homo/heterosexual definition" (p. 2). Although Sedgwick's genealogy of sexual identity is by no means the uncontested account of modern sexuality's historicity, it is useful in describing what the eventual effect of sexual categorization would become with the popularization of medical discourses vis-à-vis sexuality in the latter half of the 20th century. The compulsory assignation Sedgwick describes is the very phenomenon that renders Craig's effort to conceptualize two gendered object choices impossible because, as Sedgwick (1990/2008) contends, heterosexual desire relies upon the subsumption and repudiation of homosexual desire to render itself intelligible and vice versa.

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When Craig deems an amalgamation of heterosexuality and homosexuality (in a '50/50' structure) terrible, one might consider what this piece of dialogue refers to more broadly vis-à-vis hegemonic conceptions of sexuality. This desire is 'terrible' first, because a single object of desire is unknowable and second, because together the two cannot achieve intelligibility without mutual repudiation. It is these dominant systems of knowledge that strip bisexual desire of a knowable univocality; their aim is not known, and how, therefore asks Craig, can they be realized? Craig's dialogue evinces the issue of conceptualizing sexuality, one that is inherent to questions around representing sexuality on film. The notion of fulfilment is useful in understanding the structuring of dominant monosexualities, but further, the question "how could any *one* relationship ever possibly be fulfilling" (Araki, 1987) is importantly centred around a concern vis-à-vis monogamous relationship structures, alleging that such structures cannot accommodate bisexual desire. The promise of fulfilment through monosexual desire with a single gendered aim can be seen to work in a similar way to the promise of fulfilment in monogamy that purports one exclusive object of desire. Michel Foucault (1976/1998) argues that in the 18th and 19th centuries in the West, heterosexual monogamy became the centrifugal locus from which excess was measured and, simultaneously, the site that was spared the rigours of discursive sexual scrutiny.

[p.106] Foucault (1976/1998) articulates the simultaneous process through which heterosexuality and monogamy became naturalized while concomitantly, that which exceeded both was discursively cast into the realm of the perverse. The excesses of bisexuality and nonmonogamy are thus relegated to a similar space of perversion, and though monogamous modes of homosexuality emerged in the late 20th century in more normative figurations (Duggan, 2003), bisexuality's 'ontological' excess has been unable to make such a claim for itself. A binarist homology thus emerges in which (hetero)monosexual desire befits monogamy and bisexual desire befits nonmonogamy in the material realization of desire through sex and relationships. By 'material,' I refer to the visual representation of bodies enacting desire; this issue is germane as to represent something through the medium of cinema is often to render it visual. Alongside dialogue, it is characters' embodied actions that formulate their perceived sexualities. Consider Robyn Ochs's (2011) question, "what kind of behaviour would I – as a bisexual – have to engage in for other people to see me as bisexual?" (2011, p.172) What kind of behaviour would a *character* have to engage in for a *viewer* to read them as bisexual? One such behaviours, it would seem, is nonmonogamy.

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Compulsory nonmonogamy

Some of Araki's bisexual characters are nonmonogamous. *Nowhere* (Sperling & Araki, 1997) is of particular interest because of its invocation of a diegetic world in which nonmonogamous bisexual behaviour is most widespread. One key example is the character of Mel (Rachel True) who is in a relationship with a man and a woman, Dark (James Duval) and Lucifer (Kathleen Robertson), respectively, and also has sex with others. In her conversations with Dark, we witness two conflicting attitudes toward monogamy:

> Dark: I just wish we didn't like get together with so many other people and stuff.
>
> Mel: Palooka, you know that I firmly believe that human beings are built for sex and for love and that we should dole out as much of both as possible before we're old and ugly and nobody wants to touch us anymore.
>
> Dark: I know.
>
> Mel: And just because I make it with other guys and girls, that has no effect whatsoever on my feelings for you.
>
> Dark: Sometimes I feel so old-fashioned and from another planet. It's like I'm half a person without you. (Speling & Araki, 1997)

Dark and Mel possess bisexual desire, however Mel advocates a sexual politics that privileges sex and love as essential aspects of human existence and nonmonogamous bisexual relationships as the appropriate way to satisfy those needs. Although Dark desires Mel and Montgomery (Nathan Bexton), he can only envisage realizing this desire within a classically romantic framework of monogamous [p.107] coupling, a position which causes him distress. At the end of the film it seems as though Dark's hopes of monogamous coupling may be realized when Montgomery climbs in through his bedroom window and the two get into bed together. Montgomery expresses his desire to find the 'one special person' to be with and the two young men promise to be together forever. Dark's dream of a monogamous forever after is brought to an abrupt end however when Montgomery begins coughing uncontrollably and then explodes, splattering Dark's walls with blood and viscera and leaving behind a gigantic talking cockroach who escapes out of the window.

This surprising finale brings two of the film's incongruous narratives together: the allusions to an animal-alien invasion of Earth and Dark's quest for eternal love. The latter desire is teleological in structure, its goal is a monogamous coupling. An animal-alien

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invasion however, featuring large reptiles wielding spaceguns and gigantic talking insects, has an unknown narrative structure that rejects the assurance of telos. Although this moment is obviously one of humour, its humour is rooted in the coalescence of disparate, incompatible elements. Instead of a romantic night of passion between Dark and Montgomery, which would befit the preceding events, we find the grotesqueness of the gigantic bloodied cockroach who utters a casual and laconic, "I'm outta here" (Speling & Araki, 1997). In an albeit comic finale, it would seem the bisexual character who desires eternal monogamy has his 'naivety' admonished, to the schadenfreude of the film. Or perhaps this irreverence is, more accurately, toward the entire notion that desire has a telos that can be realized, that desire is, in the words of Jacques Lacan (1958) , "like the donkey's carrot, it is always ahead of the subject" (p. 77), inherently unfulfillable. If love is, as *Nowhere*'s (Sperling & Araki, 1997) closing song ironically suggests, stronger than death, this does not seem to be true for the character of Dark. At least not in this world.

Through the characters of Dark and Mel, one can observe the consequences of two different bisexual behaviours: Mel's nonmonogamous lifestyle is exciting and fulfilling whereas Dark's is quixotic and routinely disappointing. When *Three Bewildered People*'s Craig asks, "How could any one relationship ever possibly be fulfilling [for a bisexual person]?" (Araki, 1987), Mel and Dark of *Nowhere* (Sperling & Araki, 1997) answer that it cannot. In these characterizations, it would seem that sexual or romantic relationships that do not fulfil the breadth of one's bisexual desires in toto are thus imagined to be either unfulfilling or impossible to realize. Toward the end of *Three Bewildered People* (Araki, 1987), David kisses Craig's girlfriend Alicia (Darcy Marta) and his desire toward women is affirmed materially in conjunction with his affair with Craig. When Alicia learns of Craig's infidelity and Craig learns of Alicia and David's coupling, Alicia and Craig are upset, but this is dissipated by a three-way reparative hug. We cut to the next day in which the three arise in bed with one another; they are fully clothed and it is unclear whether they have had sex. There is no dialogue in this final scene—instead all three characters exchange glances and chuckle to one another.

[p.108] This moment is noteworthy as it provides a nondiscursive material representation in which Craig and David are momentarily freed from the linguistic aporia they experience earlier on in the film in trying to voice their desires. However, this representation still communicates symbolic meaning nonlinguistically through the

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triangulated visual tableau of three desiring subjects whose bodies are materially entwined. One way, it would seem, bisexual desire can achieve the material suture of finality and fulfilment is through the ménage à trois. The visual triangulation of a bisexual desiring self, a male object of desire, and a female object of desire is a trope Araki uses frequently to enable visual renderings of bisexual desire in *Three Bewildered People* (Araki, 1987), *The Doom Generation* (Sperling & Araki, 1995), *Nowhere* (Sperling & Araki, 1997), and *Kaboom* (Caucheteux et al., 2010). The latter uses a similar invocation of the ménage à trois to communicate a scene of utmost bisexual fulfilment for its protagonist Smith (Thomas Dekker). Smith is a college student who has sexual partners of more than one gender, one of whom is a female British student called London (Juno Temple). Smith expresses to London that he is sexually interested in Rex (Andy Fischer- Price), a friend of his roommate's who has previously asserted his rigid heterosexuality. As a surprise for his 19th birthday, London blindfolds and restrains Smith in bed and begins to kiss his body when a second head comes into frame and does the same. This second person is Rex, who London has convinced to partake in a threesome with the two of them. When Smith's blindfold is removed and it is revealed that Rex is the second person, London looks Smith in the eyes and says, "Happy Birthday" (Caucheteux et al., 2010). Smith kisses London, Smith kisses Rex, Rex kisses London, and we fade to white as the threesome ensues.

Although Smith is depicted as having enjoyable one-on-one sex with a variety of partners throughout the film, this moment is of interest because of its framing as Smith's birthday present. Smith's surprise and elation at a threesome consisting of a male and a female partner establishes this to be the sex act par excellence for the man with bisexual desire. It is the simultaneous visual incorporation of two different gendered objects that provides the material from which untrammelled erotic fulfilment can emanate. This is not dissimilar to the fantasies of *Nowhere*'s (Sperling & Araki, 1997) Dark who imagines himself in three different sexual situations with partners of different genders while masturbating in the shower. In his internal psychic transitions from one gendered assemblage to another, it is the oscillation among these gendered objects that inflames his desire. Simultaneous visual incorporation of more than one gendered object is once again used as a means through which to communicate bisexual desire.

Beth Carol Roberts (2008) writes that the tendency in cinema to communicate bisexuality through the ménage à trois "has been driven by the exigencies governing

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[bisexuality's] cultural legibility.... In privileging simultaneous or concurrent expression of same- and other-sex attractions, the coding of bisexuality ... conflat[es] visibility with authenticity" (pp. vii–viii). Cinema's investment in the visual/ photographic as a marker of authenticity, what André Bazin (1960) famously [p.109] articulated as the "ontology of the photographic image" (p. 4), can be understood within this context to intersect with sexual ideology in a way which requires that certain kinds of imaging are used to communicate sexual desire/identity in cinema. Monosexualities can be read in visual depictions of desire through the combination of the subjects who desire and the object they desire, that are read as either homosexual or heterosexual. An authentic sexual and desiring self is thus rendered knowable through this cinematic reading strategy. When the subject desires objects of more than one gender, 'both' (as the ménage à trois does reinforce this binary) must be rendered visible simultaneously, lest they be read as monosexual within this reading code.

Yet this trope is not only visual, but one that can be communicated in dialogue. In *The Doom Generation* (Sperling & Araki, 1995), the character of Xavier (Jonathan Schaech) describes the joys of what he calls "a double-stuff, E.T. finger touch" (Sperling & Araki, 1995), by which he means a sex act in which two penises penetrate another person anally and vaginally at the same time. He describes the sex act as follows, "It's the best ... as you're all poundin' away, your balls are slappin' against the other guy's and you can actually feel his cock through the girl's insides" (Sperling & Araki, 1995). In the dialogue of Xavier, one can observe a representation of bisexual desire coded with two genital aims, the combination of which producing a sex act purported to be its apex.

In *Three Bewildered People* (Araki, 1987), *The Doom Generation* (Sperling & Araki, 1995), *Nowhere* (Sperling & Araki, 1997), and *Kaboom* (Caucheteux et al., 2010), the triangulated vision of intra- and extragender sexual assemblages is thus established as the acme of bisexual desire: the utopian ending, the 'best' sex act, the masturbatory fantasy, the birthday present. Conversely, it is important to note a significant deviation from this representational trope that occurs in Araki's *Splendor* (Broadbent et al., 1999), which features an expressly extragender ménage à trois relationship. When Veronica (Kathleen Robertson) simultaneously falls in love with Abel (Johnathon Schaech) and Zed (Matt Keeslar), the three end up moving in together, both men having a relationship with Veronica, but never with one another. Kylo-Patrick R. Hart (2010) bemoans the atypicality of Araki representing "a threesome relationship between a heterosexual woman and two heterosexual – not even

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bisexual men" (p. 60). First, it is important to note that Hart's claim belies the dialogue of Veronica and Zed who allude to having had intragender sexual experiences (perhaps revealing Hart's reading strategy to be one that equates the visual with the authentic). But further, Hart fails to interrogate how the teasing invocation of the ménage à trois image bereft of 'material' bisexuality complicates Araki's prior invocations of this same trope. Invoking the ménage à trois in a way that does not function to communicate characters' bisexualities can be understood to undermine the sign's hermeneutic power and weaken the link between the visual and the authentic.

It is worth briefly considering Araki's stoner comedy *Smiley Face* (Phillips & Araki, 2007) which—while being far from queer in any substantive way—features [p.110] a moment in which protagonist Jane (Anna Faris) receives a motorbike ride from a queerly coded woman (Natashia Williams) but fails to notice the eroticism of the situation because she is so stoned. This moment, which has all the visual ingredients for the character to explore bisexual desire, instead ends in bathos, with Jane arriving at her destination, getting off the motorbike, and commenting to herself, "She was nice" (Phillips & Araki, 2007). Again, the structure is teasingly available, but its bisexual potential remains unexploited.

Jane, who cannot remember if she and her boyfriend are 'on a break,' does not potentially cheat on him with the motorcyclist. This is important as when triangulated visualizations of bisexuality are invoked, they often reify a sexual ideology that renders bisexuality incompatible with monogamy and consequently can be understood to beget representations of unfaithful bisexuals. Beth Carol Roberts (2008) reminds us that the promotion of this image works simultaneously to buttress further ideological assumptions:

> Bisexuals need both male and female lovers to be sexually satisfied. Bisexuals with a partner of one sex yearn for a partner of the other sex. Bisexuals, therefore, are incapable of commitment or fidelity. To be true to our nature, we cannot but be greedy, selfish, duplicitous, and unstable. (p. 8)

In *Three Bewildered People* (Araki, 1987), Craig betrays Amy to materially explore his intragender desire and David betrays Craig to materially explore his extragender desire. If bisexual desire can only be satisfied through multiple differently gendered partners and its befitting structure is a nonmonogamous relationship, then the bisexual in a monogamous relationship is 'essentially' destined to betray their partner. We find a memorable example of this in a short scene in Araki's third film The Living End (Gerrans, Hu, & Stark, 1992). Luke (Mike Dytri) is a drifter and sex worker and one night he is asleep in bed after having

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had sex with a john named Ken (Bretton Vail) when Ken's wife Barbie (Nicole Dillenberg) enters the room and says:

> Barbie: Ken, I thought we were finished with this little phase.
>
> Ken: I had a relapse. I'm sorry.
>
> Barbie: It's … it's not the seventies anymore when being married to a bisexual was fashionable. I just can't take this anymore, Ken. I can't take this anymore. (Gerrans et al., 1992)

Barbie proceeds to stab and kill Ken in bed. Although this scene is conspicuously comical with its characters' names mocking heteronormativity, its hammy acting, grandiose dialogue, and over-the-top violence, the fulcrum of the scene's humour is the joke that the bisexual man in a relationship will always 'relapse' into sex with another man at the cost of his fidelity to a woman. As a point of contrast, it is interesting to consider a similar sequence in *White Bird in a Blizzard* (Caucheteux et al., 2014), a drama thriller with an expressly more 'sincere' tone than *The Living End* (Gerrans et al., 1992). When Eve (Eva [p.111] Green) walks in on her husband Brock (Christopher Meloni) cheating on her with their daughter's boyfriend Phil (Shiloh Fernandez), she is initially shocked and then proceeds to laugh uncontrollably. Phil responds by strangling Eve, eventually killing her. Like Ken, Brock is a man with bisexual desire who cheats on his wife with another man, however in *White Bird*, this is not played for comic effect. Instead, it is the narrative apotheosis, the twist that reveals the film's predominant narrative concern: how and why Eve disappears. Although these two moments are tonally dissimilar, both are mutually invested in the image of a man cheating on a woman with another man as a means through which to communicate a character's bisexuality. The joke of *The Living End* becomes the twist of *White Bird* and this speaks to the narrative versatility of the trope as well as its potential to induce murderous responses in camp and 'serious' generic contexts (something that is also relevant to discussions vis-à-vis the cultural alignment of bisexuality with depravity; Eadie, 1997; Eisner, 2013; Hemmings, 1993).

Like multiply-gendered nonmonogamy, infidelity within monogamous relationships thus emerges homologously as a means through which bisexuality can be definitively represented. This is because the image purports to show bisexual people who are 'wholly satisfied' within the discourse of object desire that monosexual normativity promotes.

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However, triangulated visualizations also work on a temporal level, as Maria San Filippo (2013) argues, functioning as "time-saving structures that overcome the problem of temporality by allowing for a character's simultaneous exploration of same sex and opposite sex desire" (p. 37). When a character's bisexual desire is temporally depicted as occurring simultaneously (as in Smith's threesome with London and Rex) or in an oscillating fashion (as in Mel's various relationships), it is more difficult to interpret these representations as monosexual. It is thus also through temporalizations of desire that invoke simultaneity that bisexuality can be authenticated, a feature that pertains to Clare Hemmings's (2002) observation that "sexual identity requires not only that one makes a particular gendered and sexed object choice but that one continues to make that choice" (2002, p. 25).

From this spectatorial position, desires that do not occur simultaneously are regularly read as monosexual. Beth Carol Roberts (2008) writes that

> in films where the protagonist has a relationship with someone of one sex and then one with someone of the other sex, [viewers] tend to read her sexual journey as one of conflict and resolution, often utilizing tropes associated with the narratives of Coming Out or Going Straight, depending on the ordering of her partners. (p. viii)

In these kinds of representations, which Roberts refers to as 'serial,' the transition from one gendered object to another is temporalized through a lens of maturation into monosexuality. Bisexual theorists have linked this phenomenon to nineteenth and early twentieth century psychoanalytic and sexological discourses around sexual maturation, in which bisexuality is aligned with an immature or undeveloped self (Angelides, 2001; Buck, 1991; Davidson, 1997; Eadie, 1997; Eisner, 2013).

[p.112] Returning to the question of how Araki's films render bisexuality readable, it is obvious that nonmonogamy is employed for its potential to represent visual and temporal simultaneity within a monosexist signifying economy. This is problematic not because of an issue with nonmonogamy ipso facto, but because of the limiting and biphobic consequences of collusion with monosexist episteme in visual representation. Shiri Eisner (2013) reminds us that the stereotype that bisexuals are "slutty, promiscuous, or inherently unfaithful…might help us think about monogamy as one of society's oppressive structures" (p. 45). In agreement with Eisner I contend that the blanket repudiation of nonmonogamy is an assimilatory gesture that reinforces the oppressive norms of monogamy and respectability. However my critique of trends in nonmonogamy's epistemological function in cinema remains. When used

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as a means to work within a monosexist signifying economy to signify bisexuality, monosexism's sovereignty in the visual remains uncontested and is thus ossified.

Furthermore this trope's reliance on two differently gendered objects of desire is mired in a binarist and cissexist conception of gender. The visualisation of a (cisgender) man and a (cisgender) woman as objects of a bisexual character's desire works to reify the gender binary and reinforce the idea that bisexuality consists of two gendered and genital aims. Bisexuality's history (and bisexual people's experiential realities) of encompassing transgender, intersex, and nonbinary people as desiring subjects and desired objects is similarly cast out. Araki's cinema has not concerned itself with representing gender variance in the same way it has sexuality; thus, the gender binarist nature of bisexuality in his oeuvre can be understood as an effect of only featuring characters assumed to be cisgender. Thus these invocations of bisexuality simply marry dominant cisgender conceptions of homosexuality and heterosexuality, thwarting bisexuality's potential to disrupt binaries of sexual desire and gender. In this cinematic trope we thus find a fundamentally narrow conception of bisexuality whose representationality remains contingent upon the norms of both monosexist and cissexist systems of signification.

Yet, when we see a binarist triangle unexploited, such as in *Splendor* (Broadbent et al., 1999), *Smiley Face* (Phillips & Araki, 2007), and arguably *The Doom Generation* (Sperling & Araki, 1995) (at least materially), an important shift takes place whereby the tools that the monosexist signifying economy can provide are refused. A more extensive analysis of sexuality in Araki's oeuvre might also consider the structural similarities between bisexuality and asexuality, as has been argued by Kristin S. Scherrer (2008), to discuss *Mysterious Skin*'s (Levy-Hinte & Skalaski, 2004) Brian (Brady Corbet) and the ways in which his character's asexuality similarly undermines the rules of monosexual signification.

Reading and bisexuality, cinema as sexual pedagogy

Some bisexual theorists have argued that instead of demanding certain kinds of representations, a bisexual theoretical model must employ bisexual reading [p.113] strategies instead. Frann Michel (1996) contends that bisexual reading must resist "a teleological reading of narrative…in which the ending determines the significance of particular moments that have come before" (p. 65). Maria Pramaggiore (1996) echoes Michel in her articulation of bisexual reading strategies' need to focus "on the episodic quality of a nonteleological

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temporal continuum across which a number of sexual acts, desires, and identities might be expressed" (p. 277). And Chung-Hao Ku (2010) advocates that bisexual reading strategies "embrace what would be dismissed as contradictions or exceptions in linear, transitional, monosexual takes on individual sexual histories, making room for sexual partiality and multiplicity" (p. 309).

Many bisexual people are familiar with the anguish of monosexual reading strategies in everyday life. For example when one's partner is of a certain gender, a monosexual assumption may be made within the aforementioned framework, and the bisexual persons may find themselves interpellated incorrectly, perhaps barred from queer spaces because of a perceived heterosexuality or have their extragender relationship called into question because of a perceived homosexuality. The scope of monosexual hermeneutics is thus not restricted to audiovisual representations but can have serious ramifications in the everyday. Law scholar Kenji Yoshino (2000) has noted how monosexist definitions of sexuality can be used to cast aspersions on a bisexual person's reliability in the juridical sphere. An important current issue that reveals this kind of juridical bias is in processes of asylum seeking based on oppression related to sexuality or gender identity. In the United Kingdom for example, Jamaican bisexual asylum seeker Orashia Edwards was denied asylum in 2012, the presiding judge decreeing, "I accept the Appellant may have in the past had experimental sexual encounters…. I do not find it reasonably likely that he is bi-sexual [sic]" (Manuel, 2013, p. 13). In 2015, Aderonke Apata, a Nigerian lesbian seeking asylum in the United Kingdom, had her asylum application rejected because of her having had been in a relationship with a man. The Home Secretary's barrister at the time, Andrew Bird, stated in relationship to the case, "You can't be a heterosexual one day and a lesbian the next" (Dugan, 2015, para. 5). These juridical examples reveal how monosexual reading strategies have the potential to interpellate subjects in ways that differ to how they identify, with serious, sometimes deadly, consequences. It is the same trend in cinematic reading, that advocates an object-oriented temporal framework that privileges monosexuality and a visual episteme in which a single image is read as constituting the breadth of a subject's desires, that reinforce everyday systemic biphobia and monosexism. As bisexuality in texts is erased or folded into the pages of normative monosexual narratives, so too are bisexual lives effaced and rendered precarious in the material world.

Film viewing is a profoundly important site of learning, in which extradiegetic worlds are refracted back to viewers through the medium. Cinema's audiovisuality, as well as its

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(usually) indexical format, endows it with a unique relationship to the world around us and conceptions of 'the real.' For marginal subjects, whose voices and images on-screen are lesser, questions of representation and representability [p.114] have germane consequences in a variety of aspects of the everyday. Although bisexual reading strategies offer potential tools to resist and undermine the rules of the monosexist visual, the hegemony of this paradigm persists, stifling bisexuality's representability.

Donald E. Hall (1996) writes that "bisexuality cannot be definitively represented" (p. 9), gesturing toward the tension between bisexuality as an identity or concept and its textual realization. Yet here I am reminded of Paulo Freire's (1968/ 1970/2005) assertion that oppressed people "cannot enter the struggle as objects in order *later* to become human beings" (p. 26). The dominant western social imperative to articulate a sexual self, and bisexuality's preclusion thereof, has material ramifications, some of which are markedly present in the confusion, despondency, and alienation of some of Araki's bisexual characters. Clare Hemmings (personal communication, August 2, 2015) suggests that the "impossibility of filmic rep[resentation] for bisexuals could be said to reveal the failures of representation and desire more generally." Such may be the epistemological utility of bisexuality to interrogate the sexual and cinematic apparatuses that assuredly lay claim to whole and intelligible subjects. Yet though one may be able to ascertain the workings of such systems, one must recognize the real and affective impact of cinematic representations. As bell hooks (1996) writes:

> Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people.... The fact that some folks may attend films as "resisting spectators" does not really change the reality that most of us, no matter how sophisticated our strategies of critique and intervention, are usually seduced, at least for a time, by the images we see on the screen. (pp. 2–3)

Although one may use a strategic bisexual spectatorial positioning to critique the claim to cinematic representation that posits whole, knowable, and homogenous subjects, the seductive allure of representation remains. In Araki's cinema, bisexual people may find a hologram of themselves; be it in the moment in which *Three Bewildered People*'s (Araki, 1987) Craig muses that he might be bisexual, in the unequivocal love *Nowhere*'s (Sperling & Araki, 1997) Mel shows to Lucifer and Dark, or perhaps even in *White Bird*'s (Caucheteux et al., 2014) narrative finale, when the film's twist concomitantly reveals Brock and Phil's bisexual desires.

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Yet the recurrence of a triangulated, nonmonogamous bisexual trope—one that colludes with monosexual episteme—limits the scope of bisexualities that can be rendered cinematically. This trope is invoked and undermined, sometimes used with sincerity, sometimes mused upon in characters' dialogue, and sometimes employed in an ironic or excessive aesthetic context. With bisexuality— and like bisexuality—Araki cannot be said to be doing just one thing. Perhaps, instead, what one finds in Araki's oeuvre are ephemeral moments in which bisexuality is discernible in a space in which it is usually rendered invisible, and, briefly, a bisexual viewer may partake in the seductive farce of self-recognition.

[p.115]

Note

[1] Araki himself has notably had relationships with men and women and has described his sexuality in a variety of ways over the last 20 years. The director's sexuality may be of interest in the context of queer auteurist filmmaking, a concept with which Araki has aligned himself (1992).

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