

How do *I saw the TV glow* (2024) and *Will & Harper* (2024) differ in representing the transgender experience?

Shortjorts88

<https://shortjorts88.neocities.org/pages/filmreviews>

Word count: 2194

Both *I saw the TV glow* (Shoenbrun 2024) and *Will & Harper* (Greenbaum 2024) re-present similar emotional experiences from different perspectives; *I saw the TV glow* focuses on the act of self-acceptance in the face of self-doubt and communicates its message in a way intended for transgender audiences, whereas *Will & Harper* focuses on self-acceptance in the face of doubt from others with general audiences in mind. This essay will argue that the differing cultural contexts of these two texts change how the audience accepts them as reality.

Representing something, if considering the most common definition, would mean to speak for another person. However, in this essay, 'representing' will be used to describe a different phenomenon that Bernadette Casey explains as "*no matter how 'realistic' the presentation might be, what we see on screen will be a construction*" (Casey et al. 2005: 234–8). To make this distinction clear, I will write it as 're-presentation', with a hyphen. By this definition we operate with the understanding that through these texts, the directors are re-building the definition of the experiences they depict for their audience.

*I saw the TV glow* follows Owen (played by Justice Smith) as he struggles with his identity. Director Jane Schoenbrun uses Owen as a character to explore self-acceptance, in this case as a transgender woman. *Will & Harper* follows Harper Steele and Will Ferrell as they embark on a road trip throughout the USA with the goal of further educating Will and gauging how safe Harper is.

Historically non-plastic depictions (Warner 2017), as in depictions that could not be seamlessly swapped out for another, of transgender coming of age have been sparse.

As political tensions rise regarding the rights of the transgender community in more recent years, most notably in the United States (Haider-Markel et al. 2019), depictions of transgender coming of age and self-discovery have become more commonly depicted in films and television. The focuses of this essay, *I saw the TV glow* (2024) directed by Jane Schoenbrun, and *Will & Harper* (2024) directed by Josh Greenbaum, both depict the struggles that come from acceptance or lack thereof with contrasting tones.

McLaren argues that “By starting to unravel the ways transgender people are policed and represented through popular media, we begin to learn how to struggle against and, ultimately, dismantle an oppressive gender binary system that affects us all” (McLaren et al. 2021). What is depicted on screen directly correlates to the general public’s perception of the transgender community. The release of different perspectives, conveyed in different ways, can help combat culture-wide negative perceptions. As mentioned previously, transgender characters are primarily written about in a more negative light (McLaren et al. 2021); however, in some cases they are simply depicted with little depth (plastic representation) as the people writing, directing, producing them don’t have personal understanding of the transgender experience nor consult with someone who does. In these depictions, the source of pain of these characters is depicted as coming from a lack of societal acceptance. While this is a factual source of conflict for many transgender people, this means that they lack nuance in that they “almost always features characters that either desire (or have already completed) some sort of medical transition” (McLaren et al. 2021), and almost always fail to address a major source of struggle for transgender people; self-acceptance.

Shoenbrun and Greenbaum both have a form of insight on the true transgender experience. Both of their films address the struggle with self-acceptance, however, convey the accompanying feelings through different approaches. In simple terms, they convey a similar message, but in different languages; *I saw the TV Glow* draws on personal and collective experiences that would speak to the transgender community more through a communal understanding. *Will & Harper* channels the experience through being an explanation of the experience to someone who has no experience with what it is like, thus speaking to an audience of people who are not necessarily transgender. Both approaches to conveying this culture to people who aren't already well informed of it have benefits and disadvantages.

*Paris is burning* (1990) bridges this 'language' gap; it addresses self-acceptance as it discusses how "Trans people cannot be part of "the people" because their differences would constitute "the people" in a way that is incompatible with how they have historically been understood" (Miller 2024). By showing a space that encourages acceptance, where anything out of the general societal norm is considered part of the show being put on, *Paris is burning* re-presents to the general population the microcosm the community had built for itself in NYC in the 1980s-1990s. It does this in a way that allows for both understanding due to personal experience and learning from people who are unfamiliar with this subculture. The authenticity of the interviews in *Paris is burning* show what diversity could mean and could be considered a mid-way point on the spectrum of depiction. Where *I saw the TV glow* prioritises transgender voices and *Will & Harper* 'translates' and simplifies experiences thus prioritising non-transgender voices, *Paris is burning* does both by allowing the diverse community to

speak for itself through the interviews and choose how to convey their own explanations in a way that is meaningful to the subjects.

Will Ferrell and Harper Steele worked alongside director Josh Greenbaum to discuss rising political tensions and personal struggles to bring awareness to how transgender people experience their lives in the USA in a documentary format. As quoted in an article interview by *Esquire Singapore*, when asked about the subject of the documentary, Greenbaum states that “If you start to engage and listen to people like Harper and so many others, you’ll realise, these are just people who are trying to live their lives” (Greenbaum 2024). The interview format of the documentary, Harper explaining her experiences to Will, mirrors the intended audience experience. By conveying the information communicated in this manner it loses some nuance but retains a surface level of authenticity. This benefits the part of the audience that is watching the film to better understand the transgender experience but alienates the part of the audience that is transgender and searching for deeper and perhaps more meaningful representation.

*Will & Harper* re-presents the transgender experience to its audience from the perspective of someone who is a well-known writer having worked for large productions such as *SNL* and *Funny or Die* (IMDb 2020). While the film does retain authenticity due to Harper Steele also being part of production, her background and the overall approach to the production may lead to the film being perceived as incredibly educational to non-transgender audiences but shallow to transgender audiences. As an example, the presence of filming equipment alone disrupts the authenticity of *Will & Harper*: A study by Santiago Tobon gives further credibility to the belief that public surveillance heavily

impacts behaviour (Tobon et al. 2021). Operating under the assumption that people are already much less likely to commit crimes under surveillance that will never be seen by the wider public, it is also safe to assume that people are perhaps even less likely to behave in perceivably unfavourable ways when knowing that footage of their actions could be immortalised in a documentary and criticised by the general public indefinitely. This idea of consequence may mean that the people Harper and Will encounter and interact with on camera are behaving in ways that are not necessarily a true reflection of how they would have responded to the presence of someone transgender under normal circumstances. The presence of creates a gap between the interactions on screen and known personal interactions the audience may commonly have in the same environments (Robinson and Cooper 2024), which could possibly be discouraging for transgender people as it might encourage this personal change not for their own benefit but for the sake of others.

As a psychological horror *I saw the TV glow* emphasises the dread, doubt and fear that comes with the transgender experience. As written about in the newsletter of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Shoenbrun wrote *I saw the TV glow* after coming out as trans in what was described as an 'egg crack', "when you finally see yourself clearly in a way that makes it hard to unsee" (Schoenbrun 2024). Shoenbrun's personal understanding of the transgender experience means that her work directly draws on what she knows and what can be understood by the wider transgender community. This results in positive reception by the transgender community but alienates a part of the audience that potentially does not have an underlying understanding of the transgender experience.

Unlike *Will & Harper*, *I saw the TV glow* uses abstraction to depict Shoenbrun's experiences rather than realism. The most obvious example of this is *The Pink Opaque*, a show that both Owen and Maddy watch in the film. To summarise its relevance in depicting Owen's struggle for self-acceptance, Tara and Isabel are Maddy and Owen's true selves respectively (Drew 2024). In the show they both fight monsters, representing their continually contested existence in Maddy and Owen's minds as they struggle with accepting their true selves. Maddy and Owen's only hope of surviving is by escaping the 'Midnight Realm', the world Mr. Melancholy (an embodiment of self-doubt) has trapped them in. Maddy tries to get Owen to fully accept himself, but ultimately Owen is too scared to 'bury' his true self, in which Maddy responds that "[she knows] it's scary. That's part of it" (*I Saw the TV Glow* 2024). Ultimately, Owen sentences himself to his monotonous life in the 'Midnight Realm' and continues to suffocate. The intricate story telling of this film and confrontational tone is what allows it to emotionally reach its audience, as it gives words to an issue that many would struggle to verbalise. As user 24framesofnick on Letterboxd states "I find myself reverting to someone I never was. A feeling unburied by waves of nostalgic torment that hasn't been a part of my life" (24framesofnick, 2024). However, when looking at general reviews, there are many people that make their confusion clear; for example, many show that they entirely failed to notice the underlying message of the film as an allegory for the transgender experience. This shows that although the symbolism and meaning gives a voice to its transgender audience, its importance and impact is lost on those who are uneducated on the transgender experience rendering the film to perhaps be seen as nonsensical.

*I saw the TV glow* and *Will & Harper* operate under different realities. *Will & Harper* offers a positive outlook on transitioning, showing that transgender people aren't

‘others’ and that transitioning later in life is not ‘othering’ either. It re-presents the reality of interacting with people as a transgender person as something that can be overcome and communicates this reality in such a way that it is able to be comprehended by the general public. In doing so *Will & Harper* alienates the transgender people it aims to uplift by offering shallow authenticity, not by fault of the cultural context and personal experience of Harper Steele herself, but by fault of the format and the approach to filming. *I saw the TV glow* offers a message that seems nihilistic to the general public but acts as a hopeful warning to its transgender audience. It focuses not on the acceptance of the population around you but on the acceptance of self and the struggle that comes with it that stems from these insecurities. It re-presents the transgender experience as something scary and utilises symbolism and meaning derived from the community’s common experiences. In focusing on reinforcing this shared knowledge and creating something that prioritises transgender voices, Shoenbrun has alienated the general audience that is not transgender and made the message of the film less accessible to people who have little to no understanding of the transgender experience.

Where these films both differ in who they alienate or prioritise, they come together in what the catalyst of acceptance in general is; overcoming the idea that attaining life as your true self is a fantasy. Jane Shoenbrun and Harper Steele have incredibly different backgrounds and experiences as they are two separate human beings who have gone through a complex transformation in their lives. These differences are made clear in the films that act as a monument to their acceptance of either self or amongst others.

However, overcoming the limitations of doubt is present in both in strikingly similar ways; as Harper Steele recalls a psychiatrist that had expressed their doubts on whether Harper was in fact transgender, directly telling her she is “living in fantasy” (*Will*



& *Harper* 2024), and as Owen nearing the end of the film sentences himself to 'suffocating to death' as he accepts that "[he knows] that's not true. That's just fantasy. Kid's stuff." (*I Saw the TV Glow* 2024). These films differ in many ways, but they all aim to gift a better understanding of the transgender experience to an audience that in one part isn't authentically heard enough, and in another part often fails to be given proper representation to challenge the stereotypes they had previously commonly seen.