

Mysterious Skin

Gregg Araki's 2004 film *Mysterious Skin*, based on Scott Heim's novel of the same title, follows the lives of two boys, Brian, and Neil, starting at age 8 and through their late teen years. Brian is played by George Webster at age 8, and Brady Corbet in his teen years, while Neil is played by Chase Ellison at age 8, and Joseph Gordon-Levitt in his teen years (Araki, 2005). This film follows both Brian and Neil starting when they first meet on their little league baseball team and are sexually assaulted by their coach. The film continues to follow both Brian and Neil as each of them responds to their trauma in different ways. The film's trailer describes the two boys' stories as: "One can't remember. The other can't forget (Araki, 2005)." The contrast of these two characters' ways of processing their trauma is clear within the first few minutes. Opening with an incredibly out-of-focus shot, a white background, and fuzzy colored blobs falling from the sky. There is sad, intense, almost church-sounding music playing, as the intro continues cymbals and bass are added as it focuses into pieces of fruit loops falling from the sky, onto a smiling child that we later learn is Neil, age 8. Immediately after, young Brian is found by his older sister with a nosebleed hiding in the cellar and has no memory of the previous five hours. He remembers being at little league, it starts to rain and then being found by his sister in the cellar. The introduction of the film is showing each child's significant moments in their life as the abuse starts. Both Brian and Neil narrate their own stories, starting with the summer that they each were sexually abused, and ending with the two coming together and talking about their experience as young adults.

After Brian is found, he is brought inside and given toilet paper to stick in his nose to stop the bleeding and sitting in the living room playing when his mother arrives. Brian's childhood home is tidy and looks like it should be a comfortable family home but is also shown with slightly muted colors as if there is a layer of dust on everything. The living room is all yellow, but it looks dingy, not a clean bright, or soft yellow. When Brian's mother is bathing him, the entire bathroom is '70's pink, the porcelain, and the tiles, and needs a good scrub cleaning. There is grime shown on the spigot as water drips into the tub and feels like there is a soap scum that needs to be scraped off. This feeling of not being quite clean, I think adds to the impression of something being off with Brian. At the time, the viewer is not aware that he is a survivor/victim, but the environment adds to the feeling of dirty, the need to wash an experience off the skin that can't be shed.

Brian's family displays intense representations of femininity and masculinity. His father is shown as being someone who goes to work and then comes home to do the bare minimum. It is even implied that he forgot to pick his son up from little league the day that Brian initially started to lose time and have nose bleeds. When his mother arrives home that day she immediately starts to dote over her little boy, while Brian's father behaves nonchalantly, and implies that his son just needs to man up, and not be babied by his mother. She insists on Brian quitting baseball, against the father's wishes, without knowing that she is saving him from continued abuse. This plays out in greater, more problematic ways, as Brian begins exhibiting trauma responses of bedwetting, blackouts, fainting, and nose bleeds. The father is shown yelling, attempting to demand better, more masculine, and grown-up behavior from his son, while the mother seems to be more understanding, and wants to be supportive of her child.

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Later, it becomes known that Brian's parents are divorced, and his father is no longer a part of his life.

Brian becomes obsessed with UFOs and has determined that he was abducted by aliens, which for him is a logical reason for his missing time. There is a thread of blue light that is attached to all his memories of being abducted by aliens. He even remembers looking out the living room window with his mother and sister, seeing the blue lights coming through the trees. His mother states that it must just be a weather balloon or something, but the three of them make it to the roof to watch the blue lights radiate from a UFO as it travels above their home. This solidified the memories of being abducted as real since an experience happened along with his mother and sister.

Throughout Brian's story, there is a thread of the use of blue as he continues to learn more about what happened to him when he was eight years old. In his search for answers, and N. McCormick that he believes to have been abducted with him. he ends up befriending Neil's good friend Eric, who is a wonderfully queer character. They develop a beautiful friendship that seems to provide Brian with a sense of belonging, understanding, and acceptance for the first time. Eric describes Brian as an asexual being and even writes Neil about him and his alien abduction stories. His memories of being abducted by aliens begin to have the truth bleed through. Drawings of aliens in blue pen wearing boxer shorts and baseball cleats, and the blue even is shown as a small, dyed portion of Eric's hair in the later part of the story. The blue lights seen in memories are the same blue lights that are used at the end of the film as both boys return to the home that Coach once lived in, and where Brian learns the truth about what

happened to him when he was 8 years old. The use of abduction memories is also a form of storytelling to show the alienation that the survivor/victims experience because of pedophilia.

Neil is introduced as an 8-year-old child that is very aware of their sexuality and is masturbating while watching his mother with a man on his swing set through his bedroom window in the middle of the night. Neil ejaculates for the first time, and very shockingly says that he “couldn’t wait to show coach” (Sony, 2005). This is the first time that pedophilia is mentioned or implied within the film. Neil goes on to explain that he always knew that he liked men, but that back then he didn’t know what to do with his feelings, that they were like a gift that he had to open in a crowd. Neil provides the back story to his family life, with a single mother for a parent, his father is missing, and that it was his mom’s boyfriend’s idea to sign him up for little league so that they could fuck without having him around. Immediately Neil has a crush on his coach, and the coach quickly made Neil feel special. Treated him as the star player on the team. Coaches’ home is set up for children. A living room filled with every toy a kid could want, but most parents couldn’t afford. Giant TV, pinball, pool table, robot toys, Atari with Donkey Kong, Asteroids, Frogger – it looked like a kid had marked all the cool stuff in the Sears Christmas catalog and got it all. All the pizza, soda, and a cabinet stocked with the marshmallow fluff, peanut butter, Cheetos, sprinkles, Easy Cheese, and the small boxes of single-serving cereal. It was where Neil wanted to be, with his mom working late, or spending time with her boyfriend, or passed out drunk.

The story circles back and shows the start of the intro scene with cereal falling from the sky. As Neil and Coach sit down at the kitchen table Neil spills some cereal, prompting Coach to

start to pour cereal all over them both to make light of the situation. Coach looks at Neil, says “here we go” (Sony, 2005), calls Neil an angel, and then lays him down on the cereal, enforcing that it is okay for them to kiss, that it is never wrong with someone kissing like this, and that Neil should never let anyone tell this it is wrong, and saying “you like it; it’s okay that you like it; everything is going to be okay” (Sony, 2005). This is the first scene in the movie with pedophilia. Neil recalls looking at the cereal on the floor and “It was like a kaleidoscope had shattered, and, when I swallowed, the taste of Coach's tongue seared my mouth” (Sony, 2005). This statement is in direct competition with the verbiage that Coach uses to reinforce that Neil liked the encounter, by telling him so. The moments with the cereal falling from the sky were happier, reflecting the feelings that Coach had as an abuser, while the crushed bits of brightly colored cereal all over the floor represent the aftermath and the mix of both Coach and Neil’s feelings. As it is not uncommon for pedophiles to rationalize their behavior by convincing the child that they enjoyed the experience (Hart, 2916). This is also a projection of their own emotions onto the child. Coach see’s the beauty of an intact kaleidoscope on the floor as the remnants, while Neil sees it as broken. This is also the moment where Neil’s innocence is broken.

As Neil gets older, he deals with his trauma by becoming a hyper-sexualized teen, and eventually begins working as a prostitute. He takes great pride in being paid for sex and even begins to show frustration after realizing that he had slept with everyone in his small town. Neil has four distinct experiences as a prostitute that are shown in the film. The first interaction feels almost sweet and kind until you realize that Neil is a minor, this man is also a pedophile and is using niceness to justify his actions. He picks Neil up knowing that this is one of his first times, offers him snacks from the back of his car, and proceeds to give him advice on being safe, while

not being safe regarding sexual health. The man takes Neil to a hotel room with stained bedding, that Neil lays back on while telling the man that he can do whatever he wants, as Neil leans back his face turns blank and eyes begin to glass over – as if he is chasing an old feeling, disassociating from that moment he begins to think about the cereal falling from the sky and coach – this makes him cum immediately. This is the first time it appears that Neil is chasing a feeling that he believes he had when he was with Coach. The second interaction is when Neil is of age, but barely legal. He goes home with a man in New York City and is forced to use a condom for the first time, after attempting to have anal sex without one. Hinting at the reality of the need for safe sex and acknowledging the AIDs epidemic without using direct words. This is also Neil's first time having anal sex, and you see him go from unsure to presenting a feeling of power.

The third interaction is with a man that has AID's. This man takes him home to a sterile-looking room, where everything is white except for a long stem red rose on each bedside table and a large reproduction of the painting *The girl with the pearl earring* hanging at the head of the bed. This man informs Neil that this will be the safest experience he will ever have with a man. The man, Zeke, asks Neil to just touch him, as he is just starving for human touch. Neil naked rubs Zeke's back as he masturbates. In this situation, Neil is not able to use sex to run towards, or after what he thinks that he experienced with Coach those years ago. This scene is significant because it is Neil staring directly into his future if he is not careful. Immediately after, Neil is with his best friend Wendy and he explains that this is the first situation that has ever made him feel bad, and he talks about Coach. How he knows that Coach loved him and that he believes that it was true love. This conversation explains how Neil uses sex with strangers to

chase a false feeling he was manipulated into having by his abuser. During the fourth interaction, Neil is taken to a man's apartment, forced to do cocaine, and then is raped. This man is a violent display of internalized homophobia. He calls Neil a slut and tells him that he is going to fuck him because he is a dirty slut. Neil tries to take a moment in the bathroom, where the man breaks into the room, hitting him with a shampoo bottle while committing forced sodomy. Neil is then discarded onto the front lawn of the man's apartment and left to find his way home, bloody, in pain, and in shock, he makes his way to the apartment he shares with his friend Wendy on the subway.

Neil then arrives home for a Christmas trip, where Eric brings Brian to his home to meet him. Neil is prepared, after being informed of Brian's arrival in letters from Eric and asks him to take them for a drive. They arrive at the home that was once Coach's house. The front of the house is decorated in Christmas lights, the same blue shade that has been threaded through all of Brian's alien memories. Neil breaks into the house through a window with Brian, and they walk through the new family's belongings, as Neil describes what the home looked like when Coach lived there. Talking about the bedrooms being a space for only the two of them, speaking as if there was true love between them, that when another boy was involved it was always the same. They sat on the sofa together as Neil described the abuse and began to acknowledge that Coach used him to lure others, boys, to make it seem fun, safe, and comfortable. Neil, for the first time, speaks as if he is a victim. Carolers show up at the door, singing Christmas music, as Brian cries with the truth of what happened to him, and Neil can't figure out how to share an apology. The background turns black, the camera pans away, and it is just the two boys acknowledging their trauma and nothing else in the universe.

There are many things threaded or connected throughout this movie. The use of the phrase “here we go,” after Coach uses it with Neil the first time, you hear it used by Neil to Brian, it is a signifier in the film that sexual assault/rape is about to happen. There is a direct connection between the way that Neil is left on the front lawn of the apartment complex by his rapist, and what Neil tells Brian that happened to him when he was eight, and how Coach just dropped him off in his front yard. How intertwined each of the characters is, their current and past experiences, and how much they both need positive people, like Eric, in their lives, and how much they are impacted by their trauma.

Historically, gay, and lesbian movies were placed in a bucketed category of special interest due to the genre being perceived as too small to have its category. They may have been found in the same space as hunting videos (Wuest, 2018). *Mysterious Skin* belongs within a variety of genres. This is a drama, coming of age story, LGBTQIA+, and still special interest for being so brave as to tackle the after-effects of pedophilia. Araki made bold choices in storytelling and filming in *Mysterious Skin* creating a unique story about pedophilia through the eyes of the survivor/victims instead of the perpetrator and showing a young child being confidently sure of their sexuality (Hart, 2016). By having the narrators be both Brian and Neil telling their own stories, the audience is only hearing their perspective of the experiences, not the interpretations of the parents, of Coach, not of anyone but the two people who are the most impacted by the other characters behavior and decisions. Also, highlights the truth of sexual abuse by someone in the community that is “trusted.”

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