

Structures of Unfeeling: "Mysterious Skin"

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Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*

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Abstract To talk about affective tendencies is almost always to talk about intensities, and behind that linkage is a relation to melodrama, that modality of performance that attaches feeling states to their gestural inflation in bodily performance. In contrast, Raymond Williams' model of the structure of feeling places the historical present and the affective present in a space of affective residue that constitutes what is shared among strangers beneath the surface of manifested life. "Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*" reads with Scott Heim's novel and Gregg Araki's film to think about how to think about the structural, historical, and affective overdeterminations of underperformed emotion, tracking the emergence of a cultural style that appears as reticent action, a spatialized suspension of relational clarity that signifies a subtracted response to the urgencies of the moment (the historical moment, the sexual moment, the intimate moment, the moment where survival time is being apprehended, absorbed, and encountered).

Keywords Affect · *Mysterious Skin* · Gregg Araki · Scott Heim · Intimacy · History · Structure · Anachronism · Reticence · Sexuality · Trauma · Childhood · Interpassivity

Virtually all of the sex in *Mysterious Skin* is initiated in alien spaces—away from home, outside, among strangers, in public; on backyard swing sets, in baseball stadiums, parks, streets, bars, and motels; and only twice in a bedroom, one of which is of a stranger rapist and the other in a home whose walls are posterized with explicit extraterrestrial images. What does the outside architecture of intimacy say about the world revealed by sexuality in this esthetic space? Sexualized space here provides not only a setting for fictional beings to engage in erotic sociality; and not only captures a collectively held atmosphere of heightened sexual risk and unpredictable intimacy: it also frames and foregrounds the centrality of apprehending what is impersonal, collective, and historically exemplary in the world brought into representation by Heim's 1995 novel and Gregg Araki's 2004 film.

When we call an esthetic work a "period piece," we usually refer to details of style, dress, and manner in relation to collectively experienced events and interpret the appearance of anachronism either as an esthetic error that the work commits in the rendering of a lived object world or as the work's deliberately critical take on the social and psychic costs of a normative force that stretches from the present to the past—as when a first edition of *The Communist*

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Manifesto appears as a valuable but not priceless commodity on EBay in the everything-has-a-cost world of Araki's 2007 stoner comedy, *Smiley Face*. The Marxist critical tradition, indeed, has long sustained debates about whether anachronism is an expression of crisis or constitutes historical ontology as such.¹ In the affective world of *Mysterious Skin*, though, the presence of intensively marked and pervasive anachronism is what makes persuasive its esthetic claim to exemplify its historical moment.

That this is some kind of historicist-minded artwork is first made explicit by its emphasis on *dating*: each segment is marked by a particular year from 1981 through 1991. In that 10-year period, it makes note of a number of converging forces, events, and registers of experience that viewers would recognize as historical: such as the erosion of the Welfare State experiment that had fueled the exceptional economic, social, and political expansion of the US postwar era; the ongoing coming to terms with the end of Vietnam and the expansion of US carceral practice for an older generation of white people and people of color generally in the late 1970's and beyond; the Reagan-era de-escalation of Cold War socio-military logics and the perhaps related emergence of a sensationalist, mass cultural regime focusing on xenophobic and paranormal threats to US sovereignty; the appearance of more and more diffusely public sexual cultures in US mass society after the 1960s, including expanded heterosexual *and* LGBT styles of sexual practice and aspiration; the transition, beginning in 1981 itself, into AIDS consciousness, with its transformation of the meaning of sexual risk and the enmeshment and reorganization of what had been chronologically adult and youth generations; the late 1970's economic recession, inducing the neoliberal restructuring of the US economy and the proliferation, during the very same period, of low paying, service economy opportunities for an expanding population of urban and suburban youth; the emergence of self-referential cultural practices among the same youth, related to punk, art house, heavy metal, and club cultural scenes whose slogans like "no feeling," "no caring," and "no future" retained their political cachet without always being overtly political; and, finally, the emergence, from within these scenes, of a DIY esthetics that continues to dominate much cosmopolitan culture in the USA, manipulating a low-fi production esthetic to engender clues about how to live without the postwar fantasy of upwardly mobile good life optimism.

In the supertext of *Mysterious Skin*, comprised of the novel and the film, all of these processes—beginning and peaking at different times—mark this period in transition as a period of heightened anachronism.² Multiple forces converge; yet things remain out of joint. History is not adding up to something, but resonates in a hovering, overdetermined environment where unresolved effects suture the scene in which plot plays out. The thick, uneven patina of the historical manifests esthetically in a number of ways: in the time-span of the referential anchors of the plot; in each medium's style of figuring the uncanny banality of out-

¹ Georg Lukács classically defines the historical novel in terms of "necessary anachronism," and the Marxist tradition of thinking the historical novel extends from that. See Lukács (1983, 151–2) and *passim*. For a longer argument about anachronism and the political in the historical novel of the present, see Berlant (2011a), *Cruel Optimism*, especially "Intuitionists," 51–93. See also Anderson (2011), and Rohy (2006). On anachronism as the condition of historicism itself, see Harootunian (Harootunian 2007, 2004). On anachronism as a stamp of structural crisis and the precondition for political transformation (the becoming-archaic of normative modes of labor and value in contemporary capitalist transition), see the special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* edited by Moishe Postone, *Special Issue: Perspectives on the Global Crisis*, 111(2) Spring (2012) and especially Hardt (2012) and Postone (2012a, b). In his essay in the issue, "Time and Dependency in Latin America Today," Claudio Lomnitz (2012: 348) locates this problem of disrupted and overdetermined time-sense and time-structure—of "resolving the problem of the contemporary chronotope"—in this phrase, about contemporary Mexico: "We do not currently know when we are". Chandler (1998) points out that there is a constantly chiasmic relation between anachronism and anachronism in the historical novel too, a thought implied in Bakhtin's (1981) attentiveness to the chronotope as well.

² I use the concept "supertext" to describe intertextual relations of adaptation across media, starting in *The Female Complaint: the Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (1998), 28 *et passim*.

of-jointness itself in familiar soundtracks, cluttered spaces, jarring fashion styles, and the like; and in their attention to the historicity and social location of embodied subjectivity and verbal vernaculars. In this transgenerational, translocal lifeworld, a diversity of modes of pleasure, suffering, laughter, gesture, conversation, appetite, and bodily proximity point everywhere out of the now.

Yet the paradoxical logic of anachronistic self-periodization in *Mysterious Skin* is harder than usual to track—and in this, I would claim, it is exemplary of a cluster of queer and independent docudramatic narratives emerging in the mid-1980s and continuing into the present. In these works, the present, seen as an unfolding, historically saturated moment coming together and apart at the seams, is not a fleeting, uncapturable object, although it is continually on the move. Nor is the present simply a space of time in crisis that is represented in melodramatic fashion. Instead, in this novel and film, the present manifests itself in spaces and episodes of recessive action that appear in styles of underperformed emotion, flat affect, or diffused yet animated gesture. Worlds and events that would have been expected to be captured by expressive suffering—featuring amplified subjectivity, violent and reparative relationality, and assurance about what makes an event significant—appear with an asterisk of uncertainty.

The present of this artwork, in other words, is a space of convergence of the disorganized world of stress and pleasure, and appears in motions and tones that raise questions. Its events could indicate a range of registers from trauma-related psychic dissociation and punk antiauthoritarianism to ordinary dissipated, distracted, or loosely quilted consciousness. Forms of experience that might have been deemed the unfinished business of the past are also cast as problems distributed among what is living.³ What scholars of Deleuzian esthetics might have considered a postwar time image style that has drained the melodramatic edge of reaction into stuckness or stillness denotes here not *fundamentally* a general crisis of experience, as it appeared to in earlier neorealisms. Rather, this esthetic performs a desire to capture the present's multiple, magnetizing scenes in their noisy proximity, tiltedness, and oscillation.⁴ Performative subtraction from the intelligibility of the scene loosens the event of the present.

But crucially, what *appears* to be recessive action is only one kind of withdrawal: any gesture or way of being in relation can be *at the same time* embedded in a tangled field of action and event, and only some of these will be accessible immediately. As John Steiner and Mary Ainsworth, among others, have argued, any expressive act is as likely a defense against an encounter as it is an opening to being seen, known, and in relation, and often both aims operate at the same time.⁵ The force of defense within an expressive act redoubles the difficulty and sometimes even the necessity of reading affect from gesture. In conjunction with the historic emergence of inexpressive style across many social registers of manners and manner, this problem of assessing the body and its atmospheres in ordinary relation intensifies the curiosity one must bring to its esthetic. Underperformativity, a mode of flat or flattened affect that shows up to perform its recession from melodramatic norms, foregrounds the obstacles to immediate reading, without negating the affective encounter with immediacy.

³ I refer here to the trauma-work of historical consciousness in Gordon's (2008) *Ghostly Matters* and the pleasure-work of erotohistoriography in Freeman's (2010) *Time Binds*, both of which anchor their great analyses to what is knowable in the event of disruption. I am not refuting this work at all, but attending to a different patterning within the historical present of forces that could be, but don't have to be, coded as the past's unfinished business.

⁴ On debates about how coherent and representative the time image is in relation to contemporary cinema as historiography, see Shaviro's (2010) *Post-Cinematic Affect*.

⁵ For this longer history, see Duschinsky, Greco, and Solomon's essay in this issue, "Wait up! Attachment and Sovereign Power"; and Steiner (1993, 2011).

As it induces and refers to a general atmosphere of non-transparency, heterogeneous causality, and withheld or uneven accessibility, the underperformative forces into the foreground the problem of understanding the mediations of affect historically.

This representational mode of action and style directs us to think differently about how to apprehend the collective affective scene of sense that Raymond Williams (1977) called a “structure of feeling.” In the contemporary world of affect-talk, affective tendencies often refer to an assessment of intensities, and that linkage leads back to an image of the subject’s ordinary life as a melodramatic stage, a scene in which feeling states find their true expression in expansive bodily performance.⁶ In contrast, Williams’ model places the historical present in the affective presence of an atmosphere that is sensed rather than known and enacted, a space of affective residue that constitutes what is shared among strangers. It indicates a collective experience that mostly goes without saying of something about belonging to a world.

We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity (Williams 1977: 132).

In Williams’ assessment, a structure of feeling is beneath the surface of explicit life that is collective, saturating atmospheres of held but inexplicit knowledge. An affective common develops through a process of jointly gathered implicitation.

What is important to Williams about a structure of feeling is not the fact of its existence, though, but that it is prophetic of a future class organization. Yet a structure of feeling may not be a map to an affective state that ought to, if the world were just, emerge later in a political drama over whose interests achieve structural dominance (Meštrović 1997). It might organize lifeworld activity into social forms that constitute more and less formal, more and less labile infrastructures of collective life within the present as a faceted space of world-making. Social antagonisms that represent genuinely clashing interests and ambitions are always part of what shapes the ordinary, but the way in which they saturate, structure, and destructure its dynamics changes over time and varies over locale. The nation form, capitalism, biopolitical normativities, all of these forces hold up worlds but not identically, in the same way, or with homogeneous relations to history or local practices. The concept of “contemporaneity” points to the neutral space of living together in calendrical time; “the present” emerges through activities of disturbance, debate, remediation, and extension that constitute structures of feeling.

As it foregrounds affective diffusion and bodily self-retention in the face of what is overwhelming, the structure of feeling of the recessive mode often reads as a kind of casualization of emotion. For some, this presencing of mutedness points to comedy, and tilts the presence of affective reduction toward the apolitical or disavowal.⁷ Yet recessive style is just as likely to point to tragic or traumatic situations. How can that be? Brooks (1995) establishes the continuities and dis-analogies clearly. Nineteenth century melodrama, in his

⁶ See, for example, Brian Massumi and Katie Stewart. A brilliant exception to this tendency to associate intensity with importance can be found in Jonathan Flatley’s (2008, 2010) work on mood.

⁷ On 1 August 2014, for example, the US President Barack Obama uttered the phrase, “we tortured some folks.” The conjuncture of the word torture with the folksy vernacular sent commentators from all political positions through the roof. But Obama’s cool articulation of seriousness with a casual mien and the professorial with the folksy has been a signature of his political style from the start: a management strategy meeting a generational norm that has ties to a class norm as well, what Peter Stearns would call the bourgeois respectability discourse of “American cool.” On Obama’s cool-casual intensities, see Berlant (2011b); on the overdetermined class history of the cool and the casual, see Stearns (1994).

view, was a class discourse, which is another way of saying a “structure of feeling.” It enacted, he argues, the bourgeoisie’s loss of optimism about controlling the market and the political world that was supposed to serve it. This sense of defeat cast the collective air into a thickness of despair, refusal, and disappointment lived as a dramatic and tragic emotional and personal loss for private individuals. The funneling effect of that esthetic mode shifted the register of commonly held affect too, from politics into ethics, and justice into empathy.⁸

But underperformativity, like passive aggression and other problematically evental modes of relating, sneaks around the codes of sincerity and intelligibility that make possible normative social trust and trust in the social. Abjuring the inevitability of or self-evident value in the dramatic, its gestural style destabilizes the conventional relation between high intensity and importance. It is also a disturbance in the promise of confirmation that structures sentimental esthetics. In the sentimental scene where we presume emotional universality and an ethics of emotional intelligibility, manners and manner are pathways to the confirmation of mutuality and collective belonging. The recessive esthetic does not promise sentimental participation in a world’s worldness, for it cannot rely on the transparency of performance. At the same time, it is not merely ironic, paranoid, or untrusting in relation to surfaces.

Thus it cannot rely on the self-evidence of “excess.” A concept oft-invoked but rarely conceptualized, “excess” points to an intensity that, encountered in relation to an action or an atmosphere, is irrational, outside of ratio. But the recessive style always ports with it the potential for denial, disavowal, and foreclosed experience. It might genuinely represent a big emotion under the discipline of comportment and crisis. Or, it might actually be expressive of a non-, or a light-touch, or a diffused experience. But it might also not be hiding anything. In the underperformative scene, one can always say nothing happened, because little happens and when it does, it can point at once in many directions. The nothing might mask an event, or not.

In other words, this mode of encounter is less an esthetics of expression than of apprehension. It foregrounds modes of reception that dilate or suspend the becoming-genre of events as we conventionally understand them. Things happen, but the event finds its genre through measured action and often kinds of recursive distribution. Deleuze and Guattari (1994) call the dynamic matter of these activities “percepts and affects”: figurations derived from a world’s atmosphere that register the impacts continuously unfolding in subjects and appearing in their concepts of the contemporary situation. The first impact of an encounter does not constitute the event: it is just a disturbance that sets off a process. This is why apprehension matters dramatically more than expression in these texts and scenes: in the realm of underperformed emotion, incidents are sensed, and it remains to find a form for the disturbance, which might include its extension or renovation (comedy) or not (tragedy). In the timing of the effect of an impact, a causal trajectory forces on the present a sense of itself as unfinished business without constituting the present as congealed or already playing out a fate. It is always the case that *the event remains to be sensed*. Recession induces a sense of interregnum.

A style that seems casual, therefore, can point to something stuck, neutral, or withheld in relationality, a hesitation or a defense against presence. It can point to the overcloseness of the world, and be a distancing mechanism. Or, sometimes a space of recessive action can be both a defense and a scene of appeal for help in shifting the way things are. It is open to ambivalent,

⁸ I make the longer argument about the politics of sentimental inflation (with implications for US histories of gender, class, and race subordination that suffuse this essay as well) in “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics” (2002) and in *The Female Complaint* (2008), especially pp. 33–67.

incoherent, or enigmatic aims. Indeed, it can involve a performative insistence that the connective encounter is unfinished, is being handed off to waiting and seeing, which involves a social, public, or collective component that has not been eventitized from the beginning.

Interpassivity is Slavoj Žižek's term for the practice of a disavowed delegation of feeling to others.⁹ In his view of mass mediated affectivity and emotion, what looks interactive often really involves the handing off to others of affective responsibility through esthetic or social forms that do the feeling for the subjects who invest them with sensation. What appears as action is passivity in action's drag. But Žižek's concept could be more robust: less about emotion owned and disowned and more about processes of allocation that may not at all involve self-negation. In what follows I'll adapt the logic of "interpassivity" to scenes beyond the dialectical one in which explicit expressivity is distributed to preserve another's interest or fantasy. In this remodeling of the concept, interpassivity is the condition of relationality as such; and affective activity communicates first as inexpressive form, presuming that we no longer know it when we feel it, and vice versa, whether or not it seems to provide a neutral or holding space for assessing situations of being-with.

Interpassivity, then, points to the ways recessive expressivity can appear as something other than repression, a splitting, or a failure to connect. The process finds its expression especially in performance modes that do not provide emotional clarity but, whatever else they do, dramatize the process of sociality by wedging open what shapes the encounter as such. One apprehends that a mysterious skin is an enigma that induces data collection, event interpretation, and a kind of auratic assessment. It is a scene for the distribution and confusion of affects, and action. It allows for an ethical scene of acknowledgment, curiosity, or attention from what can only be an intimate distance, even when a political scene of violence and anxiety in the space of difference; and/or nothing much that can be captured by most concepts of the event. What happens there—what kind of inattention, neglect, refusal, liking, curiosity, desire, and projection—is TBA. What does *not* vary is the non-self-evidence of the affective event that is materially happening.

This is why the interpassive scene is distinguished by a sense of apprehension, apprehension in both of its implications—sometimes heightened anxiety and sometimes mere absorption. Apprehension is different than "spectatorship," although sometimes the latter is a route to the former. Ordinary life as sensually processed streaming tableaux vivant suggests that there is a percept to be apprehended without knowing or caring how to narrate what is released as a scene unfolds, coordinating the historical moment, the sexual moment, the intimate moment, or the moment where survival time is being calculated on the go.

Determining what communicative and shared sense of action operates in the ongoing space of relationality is an empirical question, then. For even if recessive action appears in states that abjure their relation to discipline, apparent openness can also be a convention, fetish, hieroglyph, lie, or impulsive misdirection—a style with a performative ambition. This is why, to this point, I have avoided examples: just as norms of legibility and expressive action in the encounter vary from place to place, scene to scene, and body to body, so do recessive styles of reliability, prevarication, open secret, and the like vary in their normative indication. There is no one exemplary instance of recessive style or action: there are scenes that require analysis. What in one scene may be an expressive pleasure-smile in another would be read as a deflection; what in one place could be a respectful incuriosity in another would appear as a lack of interest or narcissism. These differences are not just cultural, then, but play out regularly in the ordinary. Even asserted dramatic refusals like a grimace, crossed arms, closed

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, "The Interpassive Subject," <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/the-interpassive-subject/>. Last accessed 23 July 2014. See also Žižek (1997, 1998).

eyes, or flat voice, are tricky: tarrying in the mimetic foreclosure, they rely on fear and manners to preserve their air of self-evidence, and meanwhile carry different ethical and political charges everywhere.

The esthetic archive of the manifestly underperformative points back prior to the twentieth century European and American modernists with whom it is usually associated: from Gertrude Stein and Buster Keaton to Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock.¹⁰ Neorealist cinema in the stunned European postwar moment also haunts this orientation, from Robert Bresson to Chantal Ackerman. The current phase takes loose shape in the cinematic styles of directors like Jim Jarmusch, Richard Linklater, Rose Troche, Cheryl Dunye, Todd Haynes, Kevin Smith, So Yong Kim, Rahmin Bahrani, Abbas Kiarostami, and, notably, the work designated as “mumblecore”¹¹; the slow burn mien of actors like Bill Murray or Forrest Whittaker; the flat, casual, or imploded methods of Ethan Hawke, Catherine Keener, Parker Posey, Scarlett Johansson, and Greta Gerwig; the dilatory or tone-tamped literary styles of Ann Beattie, Nicholson Baker, Miranda July, Tao Lin, Teju Cole, Colson Whitehead, or Sam Pink; and the elastic intensities of any number of performance and video artists such as Gillian Wearing, Sharon Hayes, and William Pope. L, who mobilize vocal and physical subtraction to stage a crisis in the register of making any claim on the world—political or intimate—as such.

One might also consider the pressure of the photographic tableau on this mode of animated encounter. Landy (2011) and Mulvey (2006) write brilliantly on the photograph’s cohabitation with and sometime interruption of cinema’s promise of narrative increase or mobility, and it may be that one effect of the close up, the jump cut, and the flashback is to flash to what recedes from a general presence in motion accompanied by story, beyond medium specificity. In much of the work of Jeff Wall or Carrie Mae Weems, for example, we witness the event of space expanding, as though breathing, in the photograph’s style of capture of suspended and dimensional duration; meanwhile the scene of the body in a frame denotes motion without the literal to distract the viewer from seeing the scene’s anachronism, the mode of production of an active impasse.

Deadpan in particular, traversing all of these forms, incites political questions about personal style in relation to social action. Expression always denotes a register of vulnerability in the social, a recognition of relationality: the conventional whiteness of deadpan, deadvoice, and deadeye in dramatic and passive aggressive performances of withholding points to the power of a dramatized withholding as an esthetic machinery of normative social reproduction. At the same time, biopolitical systems of supremacy often call on the problem populations—such as women, people of color, queers, and youth, but this too will vary—to have emotions *for* the privileged, to be vulnerable, expressive, and satisfying in disturbance. If they withhold they’re called inscrutable, which is a judgment against a form of composure that on other bodies would be honored as good manners, and is often deemed good manners in the servant class.

¹⁰ For an indispensable art historical account of this mode, see Joselit (2000). In cinema studies, the touchstone for thinking about distended style is Deleuze’s (1989) *Cinema 2: the Time Image*, but one might also turn to histories of neorealist style—as does Laura Mulvey’s (2006) wonderful *24 Frames a Second*—or discourses of the drift, as in Charney (1998) and Ma (2010).

¹¹ This set has many more members—these are just high points. Related but not identical collections can be found in Jaffe (2014) and Mulvey, op cit. In *The Desiring-Image* (2013), Nick Davis argues that contemporary queer cinema moves beyond the “action-image” in the postwar era, but less toward the movement-image than the desiring-image, which is to say his interest remains in dramatic stagings of a sexuality in excess to identity, unruly and intensified as effects of the forces of history, even though many of his key directors (Gus Van Sant, David Cronenberg) have contributed significantly to a contemporary cinema of dissipated causality and affect that is ambivalent toward nostalgic attachments to drama.

Here, broadly viewed, the appearance of deadpan, deadvoice, and deadeye signals refusals from below to reproduce power, or trauma, or confusion, genuine impasse, sarcasm, or some combination of these. Less about singularity and superiority to mass culture, but perhaps in a struggle with melodramatic reengagement, these manifestations of interpassive affect open up questions about what the terms, register, and idioms of exchange in the encounter can and ought to be. Sometimes comic, sometimes blank, sometimes traumatized, sometimes diffident, sometimes null, this recent work weaves into modernist, avant-garde, and, increasingly, popular practice an expanded landscape of ordinary affect and effect and so departs from their forebears' drama of the dramatically and significantly banal.

Contemporary theorists have begun to sense this register of emotional underperformance as well. It resonates with what Lacanian scholars of *aphanisis* see when the subject fades and drifts in the scene of desire, unable to admit the phantasmatic nature of his/her anchoring to the world, "his/her loss of symbolic consistency" (Žižek 1997: 188).¹² It resonates with what Fredric Jameson (1991) famously proclaimed to be a feature of the contemporary world picture, where flat affect registers the end of personal life and historical experience as well as the emergence of a spatialized being distributed across an endlessly synchronic surface. David Joselit (2000) similarly argues that the translation of the subject into flat being that is often affectively flat is the price we pay for transforming ourselves into images for late capitalist value. Friedman (2005) transcodes this into a positive in his rendition of the flat, interconnected world, but many geographers, like Caren Kaplan (2011), locate this flattened world in the context of a military ambition to create the present in terms of a flat ontology.¹³ But, even if one could imagine casting structural transformations of the world in terms of an emotional style—the Great Depression was said partly to describe the nervous condition of the same name, and one can imagine "recession" as an economic and nervous condition¹⁴—it would be a mistake to literalize the fading subject in a faded out mien as mimetic of a shallower or more networked world. This is an overdetermined style within a scene of the convergence of forces, what Miller (2003: 20–21, 65–75) might call an implosive ostentation, and not an expressive ontology.

Steven Shaviro (1998: 107) describes a particular type of this style as exemplifying the singularity of postmodern beauty as against the sublime: he uses the droning, flat work of Sonic Youth to illustrate the claim that contemporary esthetic self-dispossession now uses deflated modes to register the loss of a world for desire, to such an extreme that affect now "inhabits an empty time, a time that never passes....suspended" because there is no place but the register of longing for it to go. Some instances of reticent performativity would overlap with what Anne-Lise François (2007) tracks, in *Open Secrets*, as "the latency of unactualized, dormant possibility" that she finds manifested, for example, in consciously retentive modes of modernist literary speech; this converges with Ngai's (2005) conceptualization of "stuplimity," the encounter of the stupor of the post-sublime ordinary with the intensity of flattened out esthetic repetition in the modernist and contemporary avant-garde; and with the Cavellian observations of Dumm (1999) and Das (2006) that dramas of the failure of language register substantive political and ethical responses to the devastating violence of the ordinary. Then again, Cavell's (2002) own advancement of an ethics of acknowledgment offers a practice of

¹² There is much work on the esthetic destinies of the Lacanian concept of *aphanisis*. See also, Bersani (1990), Durand (1983), Green (2012).

¹³ I cannot but barely begin an adequate summary of the geographers' geopolitical analytic here, apart from to say that I am deeply sympathetic to their insistent traversal of the material and the structural. See Kaplan (2011); for access to the larger debate about the costs of seeing unevenness as flat and domination as movement, follow the summary and notes in Jones et al. (2007).

¹⁴ Thanks to Joshua Clover for this proposition.

neighborliness that requires no expressive reverb. With the exception of Cavell and Dumm, all of these thinkers retain the presumption that important emotions deserve expression, and ought to add up to events that might become transformative and on the side of justice or ethics.

The matter of flatness that most interests me here, though, does not presume the subject's organization in an emotional drama lived as contact we sense or profundity at its peaks: the reticent esthetic is more related to event diffusion whose peaks, if they are reached, may or may not be evident narratively. Attention travels and takes naps, cruises and makes tracks, puts a foot in the water and holds back demonstrably, wanders, and trespasses. Its dilatory openness is also related, for example, to superflatness, the global style associated most with Takashi Murakami and Sadie Benning, which enmeshes and confuses the aggressive child and the adorable adult, collapsing taste hierarchies into ordinary things that a person can blink at or consider, and try out.¹⁵ It produces an affective wavering akin to Roland Barthes' concept of the neutral, "the order of the [internal] grimace" or the shimmer (2005: 81). To Barthes, the neutral is available in esthetic moments of the everyday in which an adaptation takes place in an atmosphere's ongoingness, an adaptation that registers somewhere in the world and might resonate strongly or weakly without manifesting anything self-evident or teleological. The neutral takes up a Zen practice of bodily restraint whose rule is: "When you feel ten in your heart, express seven in your movements" (2005: 84). In this modality, fictional beings and narrative minds take things in and hold them loosely together in different styles of minimal response.

The project of this essay is multiple, diffuse but interconnected, like its subject: to describe the register of underperformed emotional style in relation to an instance of it; to provide frames for encountering its varieties from flat, split-off, or dissociated habitude to light and unsteady post-melodramatic anti-method acting; to think about the ways medium affects our capacity to read recessiveness in what is happening right before us; to establish frameworks for encountering how underperformed emotion has come to mediate a collectively held generational historical sense of social relationality; to speculate about its relation to the increasing publicness of alternative sexual cultures and concepts of the good life; and to make a case for assessing how the novel and the film of *Mysterious Skin* capture different facets of those forces.

In what follows I trace out the overdeterminations of an episode to exemplify how we might resist the methodological impulse to overread the body that is unforthcoming, while maintaining attention to the multiple forces expressed through that body. Of course "the episode" would be central to any reticent esthetic, as explicit underperformance is also a withholding of effectivity and accretion as such, a mode of presence that can lead to things but often presents initially as a drag on the production of an event. That is what an episode is, a space of action leaking into pasts and futures at its borders while stretching out the present moment in a drama of adjustment in lieu of confidence about the event. Scenarios of the reticent esthetic post an ellipsis where the exclamation point once might have been.

In the first quarter of Araki's *Mysterious Skin* (21:00), the character called "Neil McCormick" embarks on his very first episode of gay sex for pay: the novel records that a high school friend had taught him where the cruising and hustling in town took place, and he alights to the playground excited to get money for the sexual contact he already likes. His friend gives him a piece of advice for getting his way with the tricks of the trade: "Empty the emotion from your face" (Heim 1995: 68). The chances are good that, in any case, Neil would have been unfathomable to his clients, manifesting no interest in cultivating the self-revealing intimacy relation that people often build onto sex. He wants contact of a sort, though. His

¹⁵ On the internal tensions of superflatness, see, for example, Ivy (2010).

consciousness is by that point entirely sexualized: as the novel elaborates, “I would see sex everywhere, splinters shoved into each molecule of each space, saturating everything I saw and smelled and tasted and touched” (38).

His prior introduction explains why the splinter and why the saturation. The narrative architecture of Heim’s novel is anachronistic, proceeding not chronologically but according to the subjective and overlapping time-space coordinates of five different diaries, interlaced within three, progressively fading, synesthetic atmospheres: sections called “Blue,” “Gray,” and “White.” Each diary is distinguished by one person’s writing voice and singular experience, but together they constitute an expressive space for a generation of youth figuring *out what in the world to do with their agency*, their energy and desire, their ambition. The collection of voices also creates the register and tones of the historical in the sensorium of the present: subjectively, this moment in transition between the 1980s and 1990s involves not just a history of sexuality but of the emergence of a bleak affective and economic landscape stretching from flat life in flat Kansas to the extended, isolated, blank time on the subway after a long New York night; from childhoods to the extended period of a present life-era without a name, too old for adolescence but not either an adulthood organized by family or reproduction; from one generation’s assurance about what the good life looks like to another’s murky esthetic of the ongoing present of the hustle whose relation to the future involves sentences about otherworlds floating on a sea of vagueness.

Araki’s film too proceeds in segments distinguished by alternating voice-overs, but many fewer than the novel: the film funnels the novel’s broad historical gaze into the story of the non-relation between two boys who turn out to have a relation. The film begins with the monolog of Brian Lackey: Brian and Neil were each molested by the Little League coach whom they shared, Neil first. Neil then collaborates with the coach to conscript Brian into participating in their theater of sexuality, which not only involves molesting the younger boy with and for the coach but getting Brian to speak it as pleasure. Neil: “It’s fun, right? Tell him you think it’s fun.” (Fig. 1) This verbal component of the sexual trauma would be enough to flatten affectively any boy’s remaining speech. We do not hear the story that explains all of this until the narrative’s end.

Segment one of the film, in Brian’s voice, repeats the opening line of the novel: “The summer I was 8 years old, 5 hours disappeared from my life.” Brian marks the sexual events as the beginning of mysterious bodily effects, involving sudden nose bleeding, bad dreams, and spontaneous dramatic fainting (Fig. 2). Then, quite separately, the film recounts a paranormal encounter that Brian and his family have later that summer, a close encounter of a different kind, a UFO sighting. Throughout, Brian’s face is a study in stuckness. From the moment we



Fig. 1 Neil (right) whispering to Brian (left)

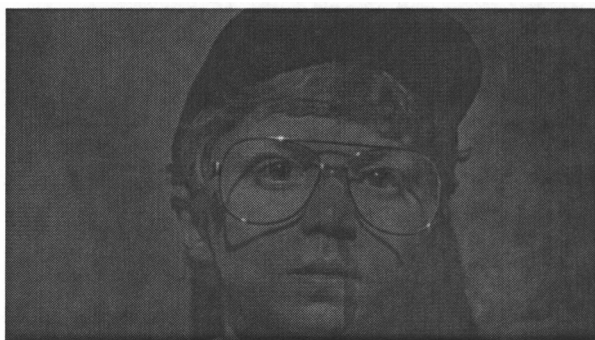


Fig. 2 Brian experiencing sudden nose bleeding

see him caught in the rain on the night of his molestation, he has the child's reticence and resignation in response to a world that is been presented to him as not his own but as a theater for adult flagrancy. He *already has* the injured puppy's fear of risk; he retains the quietness of awe and wonder. His mother works for the Kansas prisons, but she is kind; his father, a businessman, finds his son a sissy, weak. So what happens to him with the coach happens in a context where he's used to saying the phrase, "Sorry, Dad." All of this pressure on Brian to maintain existence in a world that is not safe for him produces a stillness in relation to stuckness that establishes the affective range of his ordinary performance. He is a sweet, agreeable thing who pales in the everyday and hoards his intensity, channeling it into high anxiety docudramas and bursts of dreams and art that detail alien worlds of shock and intensity. Heim and Araki, then, orchestrate who Brian is within multiple situations that shape his performative orientation to the world: Araki shoots him like the "baby beagle" he is analogized to by Heim, a soft intimidated animal stumbling around never competent to grace (199).

Brian's unstable otherworld is paranormal and Neil's is too, in a way, but not in the usual way. Where Brian's story begins in rivening loss, Neil's loss takes an antithetical valence. He introduces himself in the film's second segment: "The summer I was 8 years old, I *came* for the first time." Araki has us first encounter Neil at eight masturbating quietly, his luscious face flickering in the shadows of the streetlight (Fig. 3). Like Brian, he is looking at the world decipheringly and from a distance, but this time the gaze is at an *identified* swinging object—the swing set in his backyard, on which his mother is giving head to the kind of hairy and

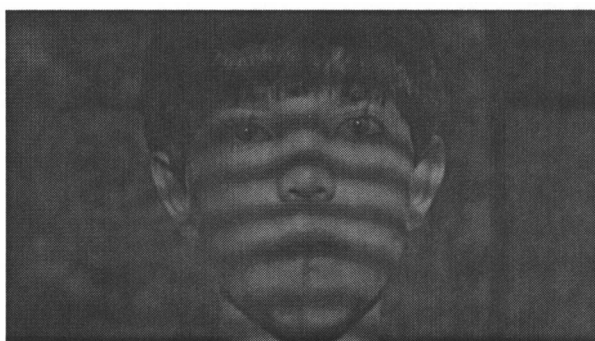


Fig. 3 Neil desiring in the shadows of the streetlight



Fig. 4 Neil and Brian's Little League coach

heavily mustachioed “Marlboro” man whom, Neil says, “I would years later come to call my type” and whose ecstatic grunts become Neil’s main style of ordinary speech. While Neil is coming, he imitates the tilt and groan of his mother’s lover: it is unclear whether he wants to have him, be him, or both.

To explain the achievement of this moment of coming into coming, though, the boy’s voice-over tells us that we have to know a little history, for a strange and strangely lit face popped up during the masturbation sequence. While the novel leads up to this moment chronologically, Neil’s cinematic memories appear in a montage that uses his voice to caption his past as a digital video album that never feels past but anachronistic, an amalgamating multiplicity of converging impacts. The backstory involves an embedded flashback. The first cut is to Neil meeting the little league coach, Coach Heider. In the novel, Neil describes the impact as lust at first sight, a passage distributed across the film’s voice-over: “Desire sledgehammered my body, a sensation I still wasn’t sure I had a name for. If I saw coach now, say across a crowded bar, that feeling would translate to something like ‘I want to fuck him.’ Back then, I wasn’t sure what to do with my emotion. It felt like a gift I had to open in front of a crowd” (22) (Figs. 4, 5, and 6).

This impact leads to a Galatea moment: the camera cuts to “the lifeguards, cowboys, and firemen I’d seen in the *Playgirls* that my mom kept stashed under her bed,” and although he is taking up the mother’s sexual objects as his own and establishing sexual continuity with the contemporaneous coastal culture of gay clone machismo so looked down upon by Foucault and other sophisticates of the time¹⁶—nonetheless, Neil is also a little boy, and when the little boy meets his object in real life, what he *does* is to look down and away, remaining mute—the way a 9-year-old might; or, the way someone overwhelmed by desire might; or the way a shy person might; the way a boy trained in not being a sissy might; the way a well-mannered being might; the way an untrusting person might; or, the way someone resigned to the failure of language might, faced with the fact of its descriptive and performative inadequacy to capturing a world that holds the ripest intensities.

Neil has reason to be resigned. The book narrates casually that his father died in Vietnam (65), but the film presumes this and much else. Araki’s viewer finds him living in overclose contact with his sexy and exuberant mother, who works as a supermarket cashier, drinks too much, and flaunts too much. He even attributes his baseball career to his mother’s desire for

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” in “Friendship as a Way of Life,” trans. John Johnston, in *Essential Works 1: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1981; New York: The New Press, 1997), 136–40. Also in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961–1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e): 1996), 308–12.

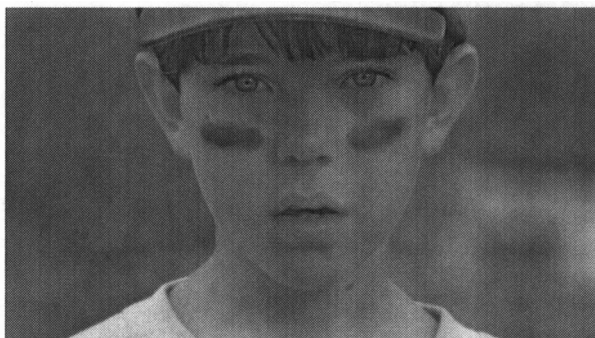


Fig. 5 Neil's face responds at first sight to his coach

free babysitting so that she can “fuck freely” without paying for a sitter. His physical aversion and aphonic response to the coach is, nonetheless, identical to his response to his mother's rough love: on a number of occasions in the film and in the book, when she kisses him roughly and holds him tightly as if his body were “money,” he averts his face and acts diffuse and mute (24). This action either manifests security with her or it doesn't.

Cultivating in childhood a taste in horror movies later augmented by porn—his mother's tastes as well—Neil has already learned before meeting the coach to delegate his sensations to the esthetic and affective scene dominated by the other's emotions. He is interpassive in his desire, deflecting attention to be in the shadow of the spectacles over there that address him, over here. This means that we cannot adduce any particular object-cause for Neil's emotional underperformance and interpassive style. Which does not mean that the molestation had no effect, but that it had an effect on a person who was already shaped historically.

Whatever the motives, Neil's initiation into the sociality of desire induces partial retreats that maintain his proximity to his object. The feeling he wants to get from that object is that sledgehammer feeling and then the sense that now, as he says, his life is “*for something*,” to have *that* feeling again (38). At the same time, in the film and the novel of *Mysterious Skin*, the coach's appearance as the exemplary body of desire, and his later grooming of the boy for sex, come to be associated with the rhythm of shattering and repair conventional to the kinds of trauma narrative that emerged, especially around sex, in the USA during the 1990s.¹⁷ In the novel, Neil says that he wanted and enjoyed but felt awkward in the sex the way he is used to feeling from the overpresence of adult desire (“Only my mother had held me like that” [37]); the film shoots it more as confused and queasy. In both works, Neil then repeatedly terrorizes other little boys, jerking them off to make them feel better. He manifests no feeling about this practice: it is what he has learned to do to be social with boys. This glitchy logic is why his friend Wendy can assert in the film, “Where normal people have a heart Neil McCormick has a bottomless black hole.” Yet, at the same time, the narrative shows him in many contexts being a reliable friend and son. I want to emphasize here, then, that both versions of the story produce incommensurable accounts of the effects—the pleasures, harms, and disturbing impacts—on affective and performative personality that Neil's encounter with the coach produces.

To catch the affective drift of his first day of hustling requires all of this knowledge about what it *looks* like for Neil to become sexual, which is different than what it *feels* like, since we have no idea what he feels apart from that one retrospective revelation about sledgehammer

¹⁷ See Berlant (2002) and Illouz's (2008) chapter “Triumphant Suffering”.

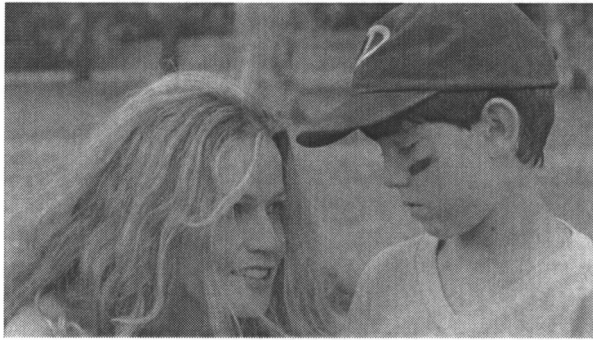


Fig. 6 Neil turning toward, and away from, the coach and his mother

intensity. Since then, his style of being has been impulse-driven and affectively incoherent, full of ordinary play and aggression, as far as we can tell, in either version. In contrast, the day of the first hustle witnesses a unique event of self-organization as a sovereign sexual subject. It is the third time we have seen him have sex in the film, but the first time that we have seen him initiate the scene of the sex he has with another person. In contrast to the other two occasions, where his main experience is of himself, on this day he calls the shots and initiates the risk (Fig. 7).

Yet the story of the scene would be mistold if Neil seemed too much the director of the situation, its dominant agent and its top. The prostitute is a service worker, after all, at the beck and call of the client's sexual esthetic or style of appetite. And, as Neil has taken up his mother's position as a sexual subject in relation to the masculine "clone," it is entirely comfortable for him to be making himself powerful on the way to the performance of a kind of passivity, a waiting to see what is possible. This is not unique to the scene of sex in exchange for money. Each player in any exchange of consensual sex is, in sense, a different variety of supplicant, waiting interpassively for the other's permission to continue whatever enabling fiction of control and experiment will make the scene remain erotic.¹⁸ But also, just as every scene in each version of *Mysterious Skin* generates a heap of flashbacks, backstories, and esthetic referents pertaining to the focalizing character's diffusion into an enigmatic affective style that keeps him in proximity to something he wants, to have a subjectivity in this text is always to take up a position as an interpassive agent, buffeted about by causes beyond one's control, while also putting oneself in situations and waiting to feel the rush of the relation between what happened and what happens next.

Neil's client on this day is a snack salesman who later snacks on Neil's cock so enthusiastically that it becomes a field of bruises and wounds, a mysterious skin that he displays to his best friend Wendy just after the event. The first bodily exchange involves, indeed, the client's offer of free snacks, which Neil gobbles up in the car on the way to the motel. His ravenous ingestion repeats the scene of the coach's seduction of him, some frames of which open the film, in which the comic spectacle of Fruit Loops cereal raining all over and around him decorates his attachment to becoming a snack for his coach, a shot that later returns in diegetic time as much messier and sadder than the way it hovers as an affective truth on the flashback

¹⁸ Much critical work on prostitution makes this point about the strange transfers of control and vulnerability in the scene of sex work—see, for example, Bernstein 2007. But the most viscerally memorable rendition of the simultaneity but non-mutuality of this relation I know is in Michelle Tea (writer) and Lauren McCubbin (illustrator) (2004) *Rent Girl*.

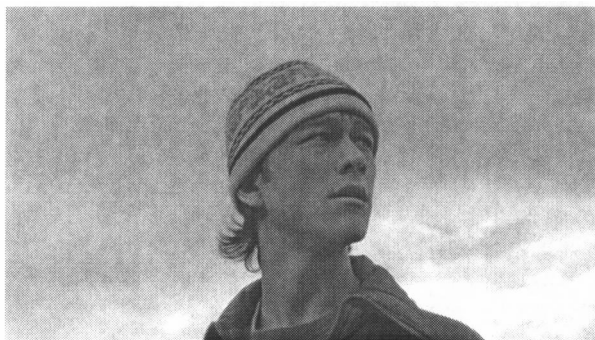


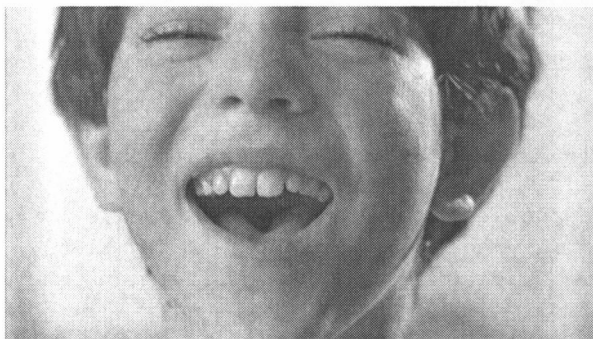
Fig. 7 Neil approaches his first client, obliquely

drive of the boy's desire. The complicated intensities and distractions of that first sex scene repeat on the boy's first day as a hustler in other, diffused ways too. Neil's organization as a sexual subject makes sex feel like a game to him, an exercise of light competence like little league baseball, where he feels special but in a not very interesting way: the camera shoots him as tilted and ironic as he attends little to his client, and does little to seduce him. Neil's job is to stay hard and come.

In the novel, the way he does this is to think about his coach while having sex with the salesman. But when Neil comes in the film in response to a flashed-up mental image, that image is not of the coach. *It is of his own face as seen by his coach* (Fig. 8). Araki does not structure this image as a memory: Neil's own face appears in a way that he could not have seen it, as it is from the fantasmatic perspective of the coach's gaze at him. Soundtrack music from the past event appears in the film for a few seconds then, to remind us of its irreality in the memory's processing. *Mysterious Skin* abounds with what King (2004) would call similar shots of "free indirect affect" like this: from no perspective but the perspective of an uncanny intensity addressed to the fantasizer who is a passive actor in the circuit of his affects. Characteristically, Neil keeps all this affective activity to himself. Neil is not a talker. In this scene, even when he says "that feels nice" in response to his thighs being rubbed through his jeans on the way to undressing for sex, the words are thin and quiet, barely reaching a tone. Much of his verbal style involves talking inside of his mouth, in a way: grunting, inside and outside of the sexual event, is one major source of his opacity.

While the novel presents his interaction with the candyman as a null set exemplifying the light narcissism of Neil's exercise of sexual will, the film uses Neil's style of ineloquence to

Fig. 8 Neil's fantasy of his face as seen by his coach



almost comic effect. As they enter the hotel room, the lover begins to lavish Neil with the kinds of compliment that, throughout both narratives, is often uttered or thought in his presence: that he is a beautiful boy, a god. Neil acts indifferently to the words, taking off his clothes and allowing the power of his thin body to occupy the space of fantasy it usually engenders. Breathing hard, the client says, “So what do you like to do; tell me what you want me to do.” Neil’s response, as he tilts back on the bed and raises his arm behind his head, is: “whatever.” This holophrasm exemplifies a number of matters to which any analysis of emotionally reticent performance would want to attend.

The pallid comic movement of whateverness is endemic in the slack, sometimes slacker, performance atmosphere I’ve been describing. But “whatever” can point to many kinds of recession. *Mysterious Skin*’s version of it has little to do with Dean’s (2010) recent critique of the shallow consciousness she associates with mass mediated, or “whatever,” politics. In contrast, it resonates with the “whatever” that distinguished Amy Heckerling’s contemporaneous adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Emma* in *Clueless* (1995). Emerging from many of the same contexts that shape *Mysterious Skin*, *Clueless* refers at once to postpunk roughness, generation x-style irony, and teenage narcissism, along with transmitting the longer shadow of Austen’s own use of *whatever* throughout *Emma*, which always signals the narrator’s intention to deflate a deluded presupposition. (For example, “Men of sense, whatever you may chuse to say, do not want silly wives.” Austen [1816] 2004: 99)

In *Mysterious Skin*’s iteration, *whatever* suggests additional potential resonances. There is Neil’s fixed refusal to be exposed having a particular desire; his refusal to speak a pleasure as a recipe or a demand; his pleasure in not caring and/or not showing caring; his self-pleasure in the internal monolog—its own form of reticence, even when revealed in the film’s quiet voice-over—and in his radically private saturation by the visual memory of the architecture of his desire, the coach’s house. It may be related to the history of his sexuality and the public and familial worlds of sexual intensity and isolatedness that I have described in which he came to have a bodily practice through his body’s thrownness into not just the world but specific attractions. It is certainly homage to Warhol’s *Blow Job*, with its own displacement of the cock and the act to an oblique facial performance. Neil’s enjoyment is solipsistic but also a mode of sociality; it is not only or merely—we just don’t know—the radical dissociation of classic trauma.

Toward the end of the narrative, a spontaneously taken-on client rapes Neil. Even then, proclaiming “no” and not “whatever,” Neil seeks out the same uncertain copresence of advance and retreat. Even then, in the aftermath, he does not break through into the melodramatic amplification that would be expected, or even hoped for, given everything that has happened. The kinds of suffering this sequence unfold pile onto each other in breathtaking chaos. The rape takes place on the night that he has tried to enter the official job force. But he leaves hustling for the dissociative smiley-faceness of the service economy that requires dissociation and false cheer from the server, without irony that would interfere with the customer’s comfort. Neil is good at not showing emotion, but he has never demonstrated inauthenticity. Wearing a polyester uniform with a cap, you see how bad he is at interactive charade compared to the interpassive modality of sex work. He speaks “Welcome to Subz” through a deadface façade to an overweight white woman deciding slowly what condiments she wants on her subway-like sandwich. This bit of comedic misogyny is mainly painful. The affect of the scene is comic-ironic in its cinematic framing, glum for the supplicant and the servant, and throws prostitution into a nostalgic light.

Neil accepts a proposal from a man driving by just after his shift is over. Re-choosing deadpan sexual enigma over the dissociated smile of the fluorescent service economy seems at first to make sense, insofar as the food service scenario is degrading and

diminishing in a clownish way, with no reservoir of pleasure and danger to dilute or eroticize the risk. But the film frames this impulsive decision as also queasy-making, as it reverses the decision Neil has just lately made to leave the sex work whose intensities and varieties of impersonal demand were diminishing his capacity to dissociate, to keep things together.

On this occasion, he is beaten to a pulp and screamed at derogatorily, horribly. In the film we watch him, also for the first time, cycle through emotions in a narratively conventional arc: disbelief, protest, fear, tears, fatigue, numbness. In the novel, he draws a line between the “bored” gestures and comic dissociation of the past and whatever composure happens in the future: “These days were a fairy tale now” (248–50). When he returns to numbness, somehow on the subway back toward his home, something has shifted: the cushion of recessive performance deflated, what was once a space-making device in which pleasure could be found now appears as a broken mechanic. Thus in the rape episode, we see conflicting effects of flat affect—here capacitated by cocaine, in its own way a vehicle for maintaining the impersonality of contact amid its intensities.¹⁹ The anonymous client’s performance of it involves a cruel and inhuman subtraction from the minimal requirements of a sustaining relationality; for Neil, it indicates first a mode of withdrawal that expresses the trouncing of his drive toward contact from an intimate distance. But later, on his return to Kansas, recessiveness becomes something else, a habit that allows for regrowing his capacity to enjoy the casual pleasures of the ordinary that include not being much known. *Mysterious Skin* does not, therefore, disavow the “fairy tale” as a false orientation, but keeps elaborating on the relation among safety, interest, disbelief, self-protection, and non-presence attached to the recessive style.

On day 1 of hustling, this pleasure in the exchange of unknownness is explicit and comic, without a hint of the sour events to come. The snack salesman does not seem to notice that the young man takes pleasure in his cloakedness; they both take it all as a given part of the game of relationality that one has to play in the impersonal contexts of sexual contact, where one engineers a way to seem to stay in sync with the other who is mainly, although not entirely, an enigma. One might say that, in *Mysterious Skin*, the sexualized subject is an enigma with manners. But, at a certain level of generality, that would distinguish him from no one.

The pleasure of this establishing scene involves, after all, the successful way the norm of the hookup allows hearts to beat separately so long as everyone comports themselves in relationality as well-mannered and reliable, keeping confusing and incoherent feelings quiet so that all can at least achieve the version of satisfaction that is self-satisfaction. This is no Kantian ethical situation of dedication to the other’s flourishing; no Levinasian radical passivity allowing the other’s penetration of one’s being.²⁰ Nor is this flatness merely a dissociative symptom, since Neil is present to his desire, too. Nor is it exceptional: in this film, the rape is what is exceptional. Most everyone else enjoys the expressive neutrality of the fact of proximity, although I am gathering many affects under the structure of enjoyment. The state of self-satisfaction involves minimal openness and has no particular performance mode or affective motive related to it. The affective infrastructure for a satisfying version of this encounter requires each handing off to the other permission for a low bar reciprocity of emotional enactment that allows for a space of what Nigel Thrift (2005) calls “light touch intimacy,” and Samuel Delany (1999) calls “contact.”

¹⁹ I have been vastly instructed by Kane Race’s work on drugs in gay pleasure practice—on conviviality, risk, self-interruption, and encounter. See *Pleasure Consuming Medicine* (2009).

²⁰ On the Kantian version of relational flourishing, see Herman (1993); advancing a Levinasian sexual ethics, see Dean (2009).

Without attaching a psychological or ethical reading of subjectivity to it, then, all we can say is that this car, this motel room, this memory become spaces of affectional suspension, much like the episodic structure of the novel of *Mysterious Skin* itself, as each chapter too tracks the effect of encounters with others around whom the experiencing subject wants to remain while minimizing exacting exchanges. Here, for another example, is Neil with Zeke, the New York client whose presentation of need ultimately pushes Neil out of the sex work business and into his fateful submission to Subz.

Zeke is an older white man, tired looking, with a skeletal face pushing through flesh cushioned by no body fat: Araki shoots him more intimately than he has the other customers eager to be in control yet submissive to desire. Zeke is slow, affectionate, sentimental. He has curiosity of sorts about Neil, or just good manners. As he talks, Zeke takes Neil's hand: Neil's body accepts *and* rears back from Zeke, however, destabilized by the intensity of his attention. In the hotel room, he caresses and appreciates Neil, whose confidence continues to waver in the face of observant tenderness, and which looks like it will return once Neil assumes his position as top. Neil watches Zeke strip, lie down on the bed, and turn over. The scene is quiet—here is Haim's narration of what Araki shows.

In seconds I was naked, more myself than I'd been when dolled up in the silly dress clothes He turned over, presenting me with his boxy ass, more outlines of ribs, his hard backbone. He spoke into the pillow. "Just rub my back for a while. I need"—I thought he would say "you," which would have horrified me—"this." I couldn't see his face, but he seemed on the verge of tears. If he cries, I thought, I will sprint home. (234–5).

In the film Zeke, head resting on the white soft pillow with his eyes closed, repeats "Make me happy, make me happy" over and over as though touch itself would make even more ecstatic an impact than the intense little death of sex. But Neil can only be with Zeke easily on the condition of no demand for a subjectively expressive and self-integrated full-bodied performance. That Zeke is covered with Kaposi's sarcoma is a distraction here: it intensifies the encounter but, as Zeke points out, "this is the safest encounter" Neil's ever had, a massage (234).

Neil's aversion to a new vulnerability that would displace the one he covets in memory mainly confirms the pattern of intimatedness that has characterized all of his intimacies. This need to engineer a swift available handoff to the managerial gesture that minimizes or distances the emotional impact of another or a world is the dominant personality style of *Mysterious Skin*. At this moment in the novel and the film, Neil looks at the "sort of" Vermeer on the wall, a detail from *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665). Moving to the image might be a post-traumatic symptom, a split-second splitting toward calmness through absorption in the fetish's visual intensity. This would allow the artwork to take over the action and allow Neil to rest in "the shadow of the object" (Bollas 1987).²¹ But the gesture might seek the opposite, too, a way to converge with himself to control the affective environment of the situation. It might be both.

Brian Lackey too develops an attachment to the figures of an esthetic otherworld that give him a shot at managing the lived world against which his affective processes cannot protect him. I have described how easily he is overwhelmed by affect—falling apart, faints, going fetal, crying, leaving language and becoming generally disorganized. At the same time he is a soft, shy kid who sketches monsters, makes mobiles, and keeps

²¹ The phrase in Bollas refers to Sigmund Freud's ([1915] 1957: 249) description of melancholic life in "Mourning and Melancholia".

appointments. Even as an artist, he makes alternative worlds more consistent in their surreality than the one in which he lives. Art is one locus of interpassive exchange that redistributes overwhelming affect within a situation: an architecture, an environment allowing the freedom of the impersonal. Other infrastructures of the encounter operate in this space of fictional sociality too: manners, kindness, and listening empathically to the affective displacements of others. Even mirrors: during another encounter in a public bathroom, Neil reflects that “I thought how this wasn’t sex, really, just another experience I smiled at my face. The reflected expression didn’t seem anywhere near a smile” (168–169). Splits like this *could* be attributed to trauma logic, and later in the book they are. But the hyperpresence of emotion, of feeling too much, can be read as a defense against the expression of affective disorganization, or confusion, or mere suspension, too. In this genre of the scene, one experiences not knowing what one feels, while knowing that one does.

I suggested earlier that one can always see any emotional performance as traumatic symptom. Partly this is to say that a symptom is itself a genre of underperformativity, as it conveys and diffuses processes that cannot be tracked back causally through the formalism of a close reading, surface reading, distant reading or any preferred norm of encountering a surface as though it actually expresses all of the intensities it mediates in its aspiration to make something available for an encounter.²² Form here refers to any kind of mediation that extends into a durable focus of apprehension, from what circulates in the mode of a resonant patterning to any intelligible (repetitive) gesture.²³ A symptom is a blockage to method. An impersonal gesture, as it reaches out it recedes. Conscious of recessive action, there is no position from which to read, if a definitive method is the ambition. As *Mysterious Skin* demonstrates, in any case, all symptoms are symptom clusters, signs and tendencies that can trick us into reading for a cure, which is to say for the disappearance of the object: to force the sign to underperform, to drain it of destabilizing significance, and to return it to the ordinary flow. In this case, draining the explicitly underperforming object of its diffusion would involve paradoxically projecting into it a dramatically animating core source, a repressed expressivity.

But, along with much else, the presence of AIDS, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, in *Mysterious Skin*, indicates other ways to organize the encounter with bodily performance. A syndrome is a pattern of tendencies that signals a shift in a body’s situation: it might lead one to a treatment protocol but protocol, a code of conduct, requires a cocktail of explanations derived from what an expert’s “diffused attention” can gather up from bodily dynamics that are never still enough ever entirely to be in focus.²⁴ A syndrome is not a cut that can heal but a problematic enigma that demands a description that is not reparative, but opens reading, an interpretive

²² I am referring here to debates about reading as a paranoid/reparative project, on the one hand, or a paranoid/accretive project attending to the presencing of the detail and the surface on the other, debates that are partly about what inevitably we do when we read and partly about what we should do so we do not calcify norms or miss anything (as though there is a thing rather than a relation, as though we could ever determine the relation of the literal to the figurative, or the surface to its projected penumbra, always on the move). The inciters of these debates are Sedgwick (2003), Best and Marcus (2009), Love (2010) and Moretti (2013).

²³ I learned to think this way, about form as pattern that can induce a sense of complex action in structure, from many disciplines—especially psychoanalysis, anthropology. My favorite recent teachers include Kathleen Stewart—*A Space on the Side of the Road* (1996) and *Ordinary Affects* (2007)—and Rooney (2000, 2010).

²⁴ I derive this from Bollas’s (1987: 201, 249) use of “hovering attention”.

Fig. 9 Neil embraces and narrates to Brian

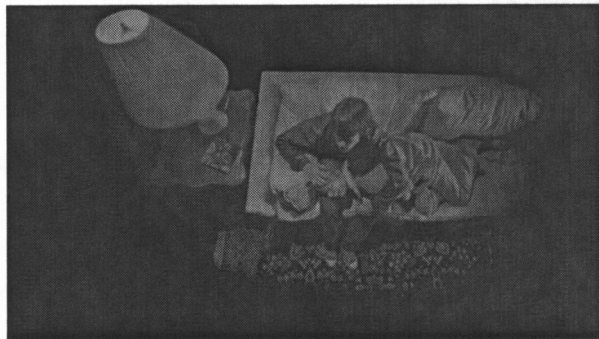


encounter with a lingering disturbance, back to an often unbearable curiosity. A syndromic protocol thus requires competence in allowing the discernment of the senses to work, follow things out, and to develop forensics, logistics, and heuristics. The challenge of capturing its constitutive movement is a discipline in allowing, while attending to, recessive action.

The novel of *Mysterious Skin* focuses on pedagogies of underperformance, revealing the present as a barometer of pressures inducing people to keep things to themselves, for so many reasons and as the effect of so many histories, forces, and experiments in living. In this intensity of enigma, these performative moments of fading from potential overpresence are exemplary of the historical moment that Araki's *Mysterious Skin* transmits too, with its dislocated camera and elaboration of underperformance, as though from another planet. From one perspective Araki's film reduces the novel's expansive generational distribution of this sensibility, but, in focusing on the two boys, amplifies the multiple implications of their interpassivity, their projection of the possibility that somewhere in the handoff someone's tenderness might find, at least, an archive.

The film and the book end with angelic voices singing the Christmas carol, "Silent Night." The boys lean on each other on the couch in the room where the childhood sex events took place, and one boy gives while the other receives the narrative that fills in the story of his life. This shift in the affective tone of the communicative medium—sotto voce, face to face—brackets somewhat the political for the psychological and affective contexts the narrative brings to the boys' lives, and translates the complexities of history into sacrifices that can be mourned and even, Christ-like, celebrated, because the fall has been redeemed, the trauma healed.

Fig. 10 The camera withdraws from the scene of story



But both the novel and the film pull back from that satisfaction. Moving from a medium-shot of the boys' couch tableau, Araki's camera reassumes its disjointed gaze, the gaze from nowhere or everywhere, and *Mysterious Skin* ends uneasily, in affective league with the weeping and clutching fully narrated subjects to whom it has returned the melodramatic gift, but at a distance from the wish that drives Brian too (Figs. 9 and 10). Repeating the novel's image of the light "so brilliant and white it could have been beamed from heaven" but without the brightness, the shot hovers there in the space of the wish that "our wounds and scars" would be healed on being revealed. "Brian and I could have been angels, basking in it . . . but we weren't" (292). The possession of a dispossession does not heal, but softly seals the episode that will inevitably contribute to the becoming-event of subjectivity that is ongoing, never closed.

The final shot has a flattening effect on a scene that can never be emptied of its intensity; it points to the enduring work of the intimate event as it impacts the space and time of relation.²⁵ In this multiplication of perspectives at the moment of closure, the supertext of *Mysterious Skin* allows for melodrama, for expressive emotional self-integration. But it also identifies with the affective intensities and diffusions of the reticent style that is the effect of the many proximate historical contexts converging within its social and subjective form of life. Yet in any story about the effects of adults on children, causality and responsibility can appear to be merely generational. Here too, the recessive style can look a lot like that. There is a tendency for older people, straight and gay, male and female, to be demanding, scene-saturating drama queens who know, desire to know, and often take what they want; in contrast, the youth generation that takes after the Blank generation expects and cultivates a different ambiance of action and affection, on behalf of attachment, love, survival, and less dramatic and traumatic worlds.²⁶ The truth is, though, that by the time of *Mysterious Skin*, underperformative style is a resource for many across generations and social locations, available to whoever can show up to withdraw into whatever "whatever" style works to maintain relationality *in some way*, while keeping things apprehensively, hypervigilantly, suspended.

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²⁵ Thanks to Caren Kaplan for this illuminating read of the bird's eye or vertical view within the film.

²⁶ Thanks to Melissa Gregg for helping me think about this point about the too-available convenience of generational thought against which this paper argues from the beginning, and yet which it risks reproducing.

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