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**Skin and boners: Araki eschews pedophilia chic to shatter myths of youthful innocence**

In Todd Solondz's current *Palindromes*, the heroine claims to believe in the innocence of an accused child molester because, as she literal-mindedly puts it, "pedophiles love children." *Mysterious Skin*, the new film by Gregg Araki, a fellow indie flamethrower and the designated bad boy of New Queer Cinema's '90s big bang, imagines a situation

in which the opposite could conceivably be true: Is it possible for a child to "love" a pedophile? Not by any reasonable definition of love. But in daring to contemplate the unthinkable, *Mysterious Skin* proves that it's possible to talk about pedophilia—indeed, to condemn it—without resorting to the histrionics of Fox News amber alerts, and furthermore to acknowledge children as sexual beings without echoing the rhetoric of NAMBLA literature. With remarkable directness and composure, it shatters the myth of childhood innocence and the deathless taboo of prepubescent sexuality.

Pedophilia has become the favorite party trick of the American indie—movies from *Happiness* to *L.I.E.* to *The Woodsman* are on some level predicated on a discomfiting, almost stunt-like empathy for the ostensible monster. But instead of humanizing the perpetrator, Araki humanizes the victims—or more precisely, complicates them. In so doing, he subtly erodes the monolithic, panic-based notion of pedophilia. His interest lies in the subjective experience of the abused—the radically dissimilar ways in which trauma can be transmitted and remembered.

Based on a 1995 novel by Scott Heim, *Mysterious Skin* crosscuts between two

**THE LOST BOYS**

BY DENNIS LIM



Tartan Films

boys in '80s small-town Kansas, essentially strangers but united by a defining moment only one of them recalls. At age eight, Brian blacks out after a baseball game, and those five hours of unconsciousness increasingly

**Mysterious object: Gordon-Levitt**

haunt him as he grows into a gawky teen plagued by nosebleeds and nightmares about alien abductions. In stark contrast,

**MYSTERIOUS SKIN**

Written and directed by Gregg Araki  
Tartan/TLA  
Opens May 6, Film Forum

Neil, the star of that same Little League team, has a sexual curiosity well beyond his years. His baseball coach (Bill Sage), a bronzed, mustached specimen, exerts the same woozy spell on him as his mom's *Playgirls*, and the older man, sensing Neil's inchoate attraction, does not hesitate to take advantage—a courtship over Atari and soda pop climaxes in a queasy seduction by cereal variety pack.

Long before Brian (played as a teen by Brady Corbet), the viewer understands that the lost time he attributes to a visiting UFO was a close encounter of an altogether different kind. *Mysterious Skin* keeps the boys suspended in divergent orbits, pulled along by their respective dysfunctions. The apparently straight Brian is something of an asexual puppy—as becomes painfully clear when he fends off the advances of a local paranormal enthusiast (a lonely kook played by the excellent Mary Lynn Rajsakub). Meanwhile, the aggressively carnal Neil (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) takes up hustling—first in the desolate parks of his hick town, and then on the somewhat meaner streets of AIDS-scarred New York, all the while pursuing (and often enjoying) sex with considerably older men. His psychological profile is not exactly novel, but given the stunted societal discourse surrounding kids and sex, it still comes as a shock to realize that for Neil, the man who once abused him remains the first love he can't get over.

For a movie premised on sexual trauma, *Mysterious Skin* is often disconcertingly sexy—and its eroticism has a surprisingly bracing effect. The film maintains its ethical stance without lapsing into moral judgment; there are no irrational blanket disavowals of sex. This may be because Araki, a true connoisseur of fleshly beauty whose camera seems to exist in a state of permanent arousal, is congenitally incapable of making an unsexy film. (The tricky early scenes with the well-underage performers make clever use of framing, montage, and voice-over provided by their older counterparts.) Few directors objectify their actors as unabashedly, and Araki delights here in reinventing a very game Gordon-Levitt, the former *3rd Rock From the Sun* moppet, as a strutting dicktease (from a certain angle, he even brings to mind the director's onetime muse James Duval). And for perhaps the first time in an Araki movie, the gaze squarely implicates the viewer, our rapt voyeurism contributing to Neil's circumscribed identity as a sexual plaything.

*Mysterious Skin* is at times slack and schematic: The narrative relies on convenient oppositions and symmetries to retain its double-helix form. The supporting characters are written in shorthand: distracted or doting mothers and second bananas who may as well have "sidekick" tattooed on their foreheads. And Heim's scenario, a semi-knowing composite of mid-'90s daytime talk show topics, transfers a little unsteadily to a time when recovered-memory therapy is more closely associated with false-memory syndrome. But as a filmmaker, Araki, always brash, has rarely been so confident, creating a shimmering mood that allows for multiple shifts in perspective and register. Jaggedly dreamy, tucked into an ambient cocoon of a score (by Harold Budd and Robin Guthrie), *Mysterious Skin* suggests a reverie with multiple awakenings. Fittingly, the ending, which crescendos to a dizzying moment of mutual reckoning, offers catharsis but not escape.