



## NEW RELEASES

# I Saw the TV Glow

### I Saw the TV Glow

Directed by: Jane Schoenbrun

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A Fruit Tree production

A Smudge Films production

A Hypnic Jerk production

Presented by: A24

Executive Producers: Kevin Kelly, Taylor Shung

Produced by: Sam Intili, Sarah Winshall,

Emma Stone, Dave McCary, Ali Herting

Associate Producer: Jennifer DiLullo

Casting by: Abby Harri, Geraldine Baron,

Salome Oggenfuss

Written by: Jane Schoenbrun

Director of Photography: Eric K. Yue

Visual Effects Provided by: The-Artery

Special Effects Co-ordinator: Brian Walsh

Edited by: Sofi Marshall

Production Designer: Brandon Tonner-Connolly

Art Director: Naomi Munro

Costume Designer: Rachel Dainer-Best

Make-up Designer/Make-up Department

Head: Aaron Worman

Mr Sprinkley - Special Effects Make-up - Special

Effects Make-up Design by: Spectral Motion

Mr Melancoly - Special Effects Make-up - Special

Effects Make-up Lead : Ashley Thomas

Marco & Polo - Special Effects Make-up - Special

Effects Make-up Designer/Owen's Chest - Special

Effects Makeup - Special Effects Make-up

Designers: Izzi Galindo, Manny Lemus

Hair Department Heads: Derrick Kollock,

Daniel Cerone

Original Music by: Alex G

[Production] Sound Mixer: Dan Bricker

Re-recording Mixer: Dan Timmons

Supervising Sound Editor: Tim Korn

Cast:

Justice Smith (*Owen*)

Brigitte Lundy-Paine (*Maddy*)

Helena Howard (*Isabel*)

Lindsey Jordan (*Tara*)

Conner O'Malley (*Dave*)

Emma Portner

(*Mr Melancholy/Marco/Amanda/evil clown*)

Ian Foreman (*young Owen*)

Fred Durst (*Frank*)

Danielle Deadwyler (*Brenda*)

Sloppy Jane (ft. Phoebe Bridgers)

(*special musical guest*)

King Woman (*special musical guest*)

Madaline Riley (*Polo*)

Amber Benson (*Johnny Link's mom*)

Albert Birney (*Mr Sprinkley*)

Michael C. Maronna (*neighbour 1*)

Danny Tamberelli (*neighbour 2*)

Timothy Allan (*Lance*)

Tyler Dean Flores (*Cade*)

Elizabeth Scopel (*drive-thru kid*)

Marilyn Bandiero (*Brenda's friend*)

USA 2024

100 mins

Digital 4K

A Park Circus release

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Teenager Owen is just trying to make it through life in the suburbs when his classmate introduces him to a mysterious late-night TV show – a vision of a supernatural world beneath their own. In the pale glow of the television, Owen's view of reality begins to crack.

Written and directed by Jane Schoenbrun (who deeply unsettled us with their startling 2021 mood piece *We're All Going to the World's Fair*) *I Saw the TV Glow* is an eerily nostalgic and mesmerising horror enveloping a powerful portrait of identity, queerness and media consumption.

Kimberley Sheehan, Film and Events Programmer, [bfi.org.uk](https://www.bfi.org.uk)

'It seems like you're always somewhere else lately,' muses the mother of Owen (Justice Smith), a frustrated teenager in an ordinarily stifling American suburb in the late 1990s. The fraught question of elsewhere, its threats and promises, permeates *I Saw the TV Glow*, as it permeated director Jane Schoenbrun's previous feature *We're All Going to the World's Fair* (2021) and as it permeated the 1990s TV shows from which this new film takes inspiration.

The story is built around the dynamic between Owen (played when younger by Ian Foreman) and Maddy (Brigitte Lundy-Paine), a slightly older fellow high-schooler with a shared passion for *The Pink Opaque*, a mystery investigation TV series. At first, the show seems to provide a cultural text for two outsider kids to bond over; as the story develops, it becomes a device to crack open radically disturbing space between varying conceptions of reality. We track Owen and Maddy's shifting relationship over a number of years as people vanish, *The Pink Opaque* is axed and the boundary between reality and fantasy blurs. The implications bear variously on experiences of genre storytelling, adolescence, gender and simply trying to get through life – the always imperfect navigation of the always imagined contours of subjective experience itself.

The notion of 'going inside the video' was central to *We're All Going to the World's Fair*, where questions of the inside and outside of individual identity, witnessing and being witnessed, were explored in the context of digital video interfaces such as YouTube, Skype, phone footage, eight-bit games and home surveillance technology. The porous nature of self, screen and body played out through the progression of an unsettling friendship – or perhaps courtship or grooming – between two characters whose psychological isolation was reflected through distance in space and spare *mise en scène*. They moved toward and away from each other in a queasy orbit that seemed more likely to end in catastrophic collision or cosmic separation than harmonious stability.

Something comparable emerges in *I Saw the TV Glow*, but from what initially seems like a more generically familiar set-up. As disaffected Gen X teenagers, smothered, introverted Owen and neglected, eye-rolling Maddy come across as versions of types we know from any number of movies and shows, backed up by mordant early tongue-in-cheek guffaws (they attend Void High School – geddit?). The film plays with the now-quaint textures of pre-digital viewing culture, such as the soft bulge of a cathode-ray TV screen or the flutter of a well-thumbed printed episode guide. Remember the good fortune of having a friend tape a show for you from its single airing and passing you the physical cassette, complete with handwritten notes or doodles (the era's closest analogue to on-demand viewing)? Or the anxiety of watching something verboten with one finger on the VCR's eject button?

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**Kneecap**

From 23 August

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**Werckmeister Harmonies** Werckmeister

Harmoniák

From 2 August

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Great attention has also gone into realising the saturated colours and analogue textures of the show within the movie, *The Pink Opaque*. It centres on two teenage girls who join forces to battle a clandestine supernatural threat, manifested by various monsters of the week inspired by mundane things (ice cream, clowns, the moon) and orchestrated by a series-spanning 'big bad' known as Mr Melancholy. *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) looms large here, alongside other zeitgeist-grabbing '90s shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *The X-Files* (1993-2002): shows in which unorthodox leads confront uncanny threats and hidden realities (here, 'the midnight realm') whose irruption reveals the everyday world as a skimpy gauze stretching over unimaginable otherness. As in *Twin Peaks*, some of the jeopardy shown in *The Pink Opaque* is truly nightmarish, and like David Lynch, Schoenbrun offers musical interludes (including from Phoebe Bridgers) as expressionistic vehicles for yearning.

Small-screen predecessors like *Buffy* and *The X-Files* – and, for that matter, the unthreatening pastiche of *Stranger Things* (2016-) – place a premium on camaraderie, collaboration and, ultimately, love. But *I Saw the TV Glow* is unlike them in its approach to friendship and affective relations. In Schoenbrun's films, it's probably more than any one character can manage to get through the reality-quake of daily experience, let alone forge meaningful reciprocal bonds with anyone else flailing through the world.

Notwithstanding its initial genre-based toeholds, *I Saw the TV Glow* is no more affirming of the practicality of meaningful human connection than *We're All Going to the World's Fair* – perhaps less. People remain isolated, kept apart or unseen. What might have been Maddy and Owen's formative bonding experience, for instance, is stymied by the presence of a dampening third character. Nor can it be an accident that the lead characters of *The Pink Opaque* only meet in person once and otherwise commune psychically. Characters seem at best aligned or in somewhat inert solidarity and at worst engaged in a zero-sum epistemological play-off where one person's embrace of reality marks another's perceived annihilation. Otherness – the recognition that your experience of reality might not tally with mine – feels dangerous, radically isolating, maybe crazy-making. When characters here speak direct to camera, it feels less like confiding and more like insisting on the power of narrativisation to keep the void at bay.

This could all describe various parts of life, such as being an adolescent or becoming politically radicalised. Especially salient here, though, is the resonance with trans experience (Schoenbrun is nonbinary). What if this given reality is wrong in ways that might be unsurvivable if left unfronted? The TV tells you 'it can't hurt you if you don't think about it', but is that true? Owen and Maddy both read as queer and seemingly buried alive by their upbringings, aware of the possibility that a better reality might exist if one rouses the courage to kill off the fatally familiar in favour of the tantalisingly unknown. Live burial is the atavistically alarming motif that forms the potential portal between the world the characters grew up in and the world of *The Pink Opaque* – just as, for many trans people, being buried alive can serve as a metaphor for the given life they have to move beyond in order to reach a selfhood that feels viable. But denial is strong and norms can be fatal. 'This isn't the midnight realm,' Owen says when Maddy proposes such a transition. 'It's just the suburbs.' But maybe reality is bigger than that binary allows.

Ben Walters, *Sight and Sound*, [bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound](http://bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound), 22 July 2024