

Finding Yourself in the Light of the Screen

How Jane Schoenbrun's films wrestle with technology, identity, and the screen

Introduction: A Self-Induced Hallucination

In 2018, Jane Schoenbrun released *A Self-Induced Hallucination*¹ – a feature-length archival documentary, and their² debut film, about internet horror legend, the Slenderman – straight to Vimeo. It is an un-narrated collage of fan films, news reports, original songs, and YouTube vlogs, edited together to explore what happens when a collectively-written horror myth spreads further and further into the mainstream and comes to life. It cuts between online campfire tales and news coverage of the real-life Slenderman Stabbing – where two twelve-year-olds stabbed a third in 2014, in an attempt to prove the Slenderman was real – and shows how these converge in the strangest of ways, exposing the awkward friction between belief in fiction, and the pain of the real world.

In a revealing moment towards the end of the documentary, Schoenbrun splits from the Slenderman fan films and shows us a vlog by a young gay man about ‘tulpas.’ He recounts explaining to his psychiatrist, in front of his religious parents, that his tulpa – a ‘self-induced hallucination’ of a woman who seems real to him, but only to him – has helped him through the hardest parts of his life. He explains that as he grew up with a military family, he struggled making friends before moving away again and again, so he created a tulpa that would always be with him. His parents found out and blamed his homosexuality on his tulpa. The psychiatrist asks the parents to leave the room, and asks him if they are devoutly religious. Yes, they are, he replies, remembering the psychiatrist’s response:

‘She chuckled, and then confessed that my experience with tulpas is no different from the God that my parents pray to every night.’

¹ *A Self-Induced Hallucination*, dir. by Jane Schoenbrun (Independently released, 2018)

² Jane Schoenbrun uses they/them pronouns.

In the context of the documentary, this is a touching moment that connects belief in Slenderman, sincere or not, with belief in God, and whichever reason we all have to find something to believe in – Schoenbrun has since referred to the film as ‘a work of theological inquiry’.³ Looking further, though, it reveals the common subtext present in all of Schoenbrun’s work. What happens when someone who doesn’t ‘fit in’ – someone with any part of their identity or behaviour in conflict with what’s expected of us all – gets forcefully re-examined by this antagonistic world? What happens when your actions or identity come into conflict with what’s deemed acceptable or even possible, and how do you cope?

After releasing *A Self-Induced Hallucination* in 2018, Schoenbrun went on to direct the (fictional) feature films *We’re All Going to the World’s Fair*⁴ in 2021 and *I Saw the TV Glow*⁵ in 2024. Both of these films focus on characters who can be read as queer and socially alienated young people. Building on the thematic groundwork laid out by the documentary, Schoenbrun’s filmography further explores how alienated people mediate their identities through the screen. Technology, media culture and a digital future all become main characters of their own, as we see these young people attempt to negotiate who they are in a world that does not work for them.

This essay, thus, attempts to explore these questions: What are the different ways in which technology, digital spaces, and the screen are used as devices to mediate character and identity by Schoenbrun? And how do they tie together?

This essay will examine these questions through a close reading of Schoenbrun’s feature films: first through *We’re All Going to the World’s Fair*, then *I Saw the TV Glow*.

Tying in Mark Fisher’s conception of *hauntology*, it will also explore how our relationship

³ Jane Schoenbrun, ‘Why I Spent Months Making An Archival Documentary about The Slenderman’, *Filmmaker Magazine*, 19 Jun 2018 <<https://filmmakermagazine.com/105519-jane-schoenbrun-slenderman/>> [accessed 7 Apr 2025]

⁴ *We’re All Going to the World’s Fair*, dir. by Jane Schoenbrun (Utopia, 2021)

⁵ *I Saw the TV Glow*, dir. by Jane Schoenbrun (A24, 2024)

with time and its passage, as accessed by digital and screen technology, affects the characters' self-image.

Part I: We're All Going to the World's Fair

We're All Going to the World's Fair centres on Casey, a lonely and isolated girl, as she gets involved in an internet-based 'horror game.' The opening shot shows her participating in the initiation ritual for the World's Fair Challenge – drawing blood from her finger and watching the initiation video – from the perspective of her laptop webcam. Throughout the rest of the film, we return to this and similar digital perspectives – YouTube videos, Skype conversations, her own vlogs. Examining how our relationship to the film is mediated through these technologies is key to understanding their thematic implications.

The first half hour of the film follows Casey, as we get introduced to her world and who she is. She lives alone with her father, and seems to hide in her attic-bedroom to avoid him; she stays up late watching World's Fair videos, seeing how the challenge is transforming others; she takes walks through her eerily empty upstate New York hometown, surrounded by nothing but cars and parking lots; she films her vlogs alone in the cold forest. A clear picture is formed of a young, isolated person, scrambling for anything to fill a void that is so clearly displayed by the juxtaposition of her against the emptiness surrounding her.

We can understand her engagement with the World's Fair game – a group role-play story that promises to transform its participants – as a way for her to creatively process her emotions, unpacking a side of herself that she can't show in her day-to-day life. The platform of the game allows her to build a new version of herself from scratch, expressing only what she wants to reveal to any anonymous viewers. We find out towards the end that Casey isn't even her real name: the ultimate expression of a desire to be, or to become, someone else.

Casey's digitally mediated persona, however, isn't simply an idealised self. This desire to become someone else is expressed with a darker side, betraying the sense of distress and repression that has been weighing on her. Even when building a new self with boundless creative freedom, she still expresses a malaise. She worries at one point:

'It's just, for most people, I know it's a really big change. Like they turn into a vampire, evil clown, or something. That's not what it feels like for me. [...] It's like I can feel myself leaving my body, like it's making me someone else. It's making me bad.'

A common interpretation, though not explicit in the text, is that Casey's alienation mirrors the experience of dysphoric transgender youth⁶. Schoenbrun has talked about how they were developing the script at the same time they were unpacking their own trans identity, with some elements of this process making their way into the film.⁷ As critic Sam Bodrojan writes, '[dysphoria] is the core of the film, the black hole of suffering around which everything orbits. When Casey explains what the World's Fair Challenge is doing to her, she says she feels nothing in her body, [...] she cannot even process it as it takes her over.'⁸

Half an hour into the film, it pulls a subtle but critically important sleight-of-hand. When she's tracked down by fellow game-player JLB – an older man who is more familiar with the World's Fair story – they start talking over Skype, and she begins making her videos almost *for* him. On their very first Skype call, he uneasily asks her:

'Will you keep making videos, so I know you're okay?'

'Yeah. Yeah, I'll try.'

⁶ Caden Mark Gardner, 'We're All Going to the World's Fair', *Reverse Shot*, 15 Apr 2022 <https://reverseshot.org/reviews/entry/2930/worlds_fair> [accessed 7 April 2022]

⁷ Natalie Marlin, 'Jane Schoenbrun: "I wanted the film to feel like we're lost in the haze of the internet"', *Little White Lies*, 25 Apr 2022 <<https://lwlies.com/interviews/jane-schoenbrun-were-all-going-to-the-worlds-fair/>> [accessed 7 Apr 2025]

⁸ Sam Bodrojan, 'We're All Going To The World's Fair: Review', *cc: helmet girl*, 1 Feb 2021 <<https://cchelmetgirl.substack.com/p/were-all-going-to-the-worlds-fair>> [accessed 7 Apr 2022]

Up until this scene, we have followed the story through Casey. The camera has trailed her on her walks; we've seen her set up and record her vlogs; any videos she watched, we've watched along with her on her laptop screen. From this scene onwards, however, we switch entirely to JLB's perspective, abandoning our privileged access to Casey. We exclusively see the side of her she has chosen to reveal to JLB and others, the side she puts forward in the game. The videos – both Casey's and other players' – no longer play on a screen inside the frame, they become the full frame, removing the barrier of distance.

As she gets sucked into the game further and further, this sculpted version of herself simultaneously becomes the only one we know. Through the horror genre, we see her channel her anxieties into the visual and emotional trauma of this fiction she has built. When she begins uploading videos with depressive and suicidal themes, the audience is invited to worry just as much as JLB does.

This culminates in the final rug-pull of the film: in a tense Skype call with Casey, JLB asks if she's still playing, or if she actually means what she has been saying. He's concerned for her and wants to break out of the role-play. She reacts with anger and disappointment: *'What did you think? I was actually gonna kill myself?'*. She had found a space where she thought she could be in full control of her presentation, where she could safely experiment with identity and trauma through horror – but JLB has broken this dream. His actions become synonymous with the outside world that tells her she who she can, and can't, be. She has fallen outside of what's permitted by the game, and this is met with 'correction.'

World's Fair gives us a vision of a young, alienated person coming to a digital space in search of a safe escape from the outside world. Enabled by the internet, Casey creates a screen-mediated persona to express herself, to experiment with *who she is* and *who she is allowed to be*. Casey's identity becomes wide open for change, for her to control her own self-image, but she still becomes vulnerable to harsh 'correction' for stepping out of line.

Intermission: Hauntology

We're All Going to the World's Fair is not a film that is comfortably analysed in terms of metaphor or allegory. It is hard to point to any singular thing which, in isolation, is analogous to something thematically relevant. Instead, the film derives a lot of meaning through what it *does*, *where* it points, and what it juxtaposes. It is not a film 'about the internet' per se, but rather about characters mediated *through* the internet. Its brief moments of body-horror are not an analogy to transness per se, as body-horror often has enabled⁹ – rather, the connection to transness comes through the malaise displayed by Casey and her desire to transform like the other players have. Casey's alienation is not given name or displayed in itself, rather, it is implied through her contrast against the empty spaces she finds herself in. She is surrounded by 'non-places', as defined by Marc Augé: transitory spaces which lack history, identity or relation¹⁰. Consider the empty parking lots, cars in transit, anonymous faces on the street. Casey finds herself alone, attempting to build a new future, one which lets her escape from her present.

In recent interviews, Schoenbrun has often referred to Mark Fisher's idea of 'hauntology'¹¹. With hauntology, Fisher posited an analysis of our strange connection with the past and the future in media: how we're 'haunted' by our relationship with past (the 'no longer') and the future (the 'not yet'). In his essay *What is Hauntology?*, he defines the former as that which 'in actuality is no longer, but which is still effective as a virtuality', as opposed to the latter being that which 'in actuality has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual.'¹² (These concepts are borrowed from Derrida's works, but applied to

⁹ Caetlin Benson-Allott, 'Life affirming horror and the films of Jane Schoenbrun', *Film Quarterly*, 78.2 (2024), p. 64

¹⁰ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso Books, 1995), pp. 77-78

¹¹ Brittany Luse, 'Suburban decay and choking on nostalgia in 'I Saw The TV Glow'', *NPR*, 7 May 2024 <<https://www.npr.org/2024/05/07/1197956382/its-been-a-minute-tv-glow-jane-schoenbrun>> [accessed 9 Apr 2024]

¹² Mark Fisher, 'What is Hauntology?', *Film Quarterly*, 66.1 (Fall 2012), doi:10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16, pp. 18-19

media and culture by Fisher.) Instead of simply what happened and what will happen, he says, we are constantly feeling the presence of our expectations and understandings of them.

In his book *Ghosts of My Life*, he ties this in with the idea of a ‘slow cancellation of the future’, the phenomenon where our conception of a future ‘has been eroded over the last 30 years [as of 2012].’¹³ He says we are no longer able to imagine a future much different from our present, let alone in art and media – which is why we have become haunted by that which is *no longer* or *not yet*, but still is in effect in the now.

Critic Tam Lines has connected Fisher’s conception of the *not yet* with Casey’s longing for transformation.¹⁴ As she watches video after video of others’ transformations, she is partaking in ‘anticipatory hauntings,’ beginning to change (sincerely or not) because of her own imagined futures. ‘Casey’s trajectory through the film is defined by the anticipation of what she will herself transform into,’ writes Lines, pointing us clearly towards Casey’s engagement with the World’s Fair game-slash-community as a driving force. She is haunted by the *not yet*.

As we move into our analysis of *I Saw the TV Glow*, it is helpful to also keep in mind Fisher’s *no longer*, alongside hauntology in general. *TV Glow* is a film concerned with the past just as much as the potential futures. It leaves behind laptop screens and the modern internet, instead (aptly) using a TV screen both as a key identity mediator and as a time-portal, a manifestation of the haunting presence of past and future.

Part II: I Saw the TV Glow

I Saw the TV Glow is a story about Owen and Owen’s memories. This framing is established very early on: what we’re witnessing is him, recounting his past to us, from the

¹³ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Manchester: Zero Books, 2014), pp. 16-17

¹⁴ Tam Lines, ‘Isolated Together: The Online Sound of Digital and Analog Haunting’, *Sonic Scope*, 5 (Oct 2023), doi:10.21428/66f840a4.2fe2db8e

perspective of his present. As he sits at a campfire, alone, he tells us about how he got invested in the TV show *the Pink Opaque*, connecting with the slightly older Maddy over how much it meant to them both. As Owen was forbidden from watching the show on his own, his experience of the show was first largely through videotapes made by Maddy for him, and then through nights spent watching it together. He tells us what he remembers happened in the show and in his life, but these two have become deeply entangled, and things he attributes to the show are revealed as vignettes from his own life. Ten years down the line, Maddy begs him to look within himself and understand why these have gotten so jumbled up, which he rejects again and again, as the years begin to slip by, and he suffers more and more.

Owen, like Maddy and Casey, is an isolated outcast. He has a sick mother and abusive father, he doesn't have any friends, and he feels like something is wrong with him. He moves through his world alone, except for his connection with Maddy, until she leaves too. Much more explicitly than in *World's Fair*, Owen is a trans character, but he refuses to acknowledge this about himself. The only thing he is willing to think about is his favourite TV show.

Why does this TV show, *the Pink Opaque*, become so important to Owen? What can we learn about the role it plays in his life and his self-identity? Early on, it becomes clear that TV shows are a crutch for Owen: when asked by Maddy if he likes girls or boys, he simply replies,

'I think that I like TV shows.'

He refuses to engage with the question of *what's inside him*, saying that he knows he's empty, but too nervous to check. Instead, he subconsciously offloads this onto the TV, letting his real identity become entangled with the show.

Owen and Maddy find themselves connected to the protagonists of *the Pink Opaque*, Isabel and Tara. Isabel becomes a direct receptacle for Owen's repressed identity; in a world that tells him so often who he can't be, he finds expression through the character on his

screen. Thus, the Isabel he remembers (as opposed to the real character in the show, as revealed at the end) is someone he creates to avoid having to confront what's inside him.

But while this begins as an outlet for Owen's repressed self, it eventually becomes something that is hurting him, as the show gets cancelled, and he is stuck rewatching his old tapes. Struck by hauntology, he is no longer able to imagine himself as anything other than the Owen he already knows, haunted by the coping mechanisms of his past. Thus, when he remembers his youth, he deliberately forgets his gender exploration, remembering those moments instead as things that happened on his screen.

Where *World's Fair* might have avoided direct allegory, *TV Glow* happily embraces it. The screen becomes not just a mirror reflecting back Owen's repressed identity, but also a symbol for the barrier keeping him from discovering who he is in the first place. His double-identity as Owen and Isabel in the narrative can be mapped one-to-one onto a story about gender dysphoria. Maddy's disappearance and return is a direct stand-in for her transitioning and returning to ask Owen to follow suit. *The Pink Opaque*, and their connection over it, becomes a representation of alienated youth's search for expression and connection when up against an antagonistic world. The show's cancellation, then, comes to mean that just coping isn't enough: you have to take the leap to actualise who you want to be.

Conclusion

Hauntology is not simply a personal experience, but rather a culture-wide one. It is emblematic of a neoliberal culture, trained by modernism to expect futures that never came to fruition,¹⁵ losing the ability to imagine new ones. This has locked us into a culture of pastiche

¹⁵ Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life*, p. 34

and repetition,¹⁶ with the previously expected futures haunting and thus dictating the rules for our present.

Casey and Owen both live in a reality which cannot imagine allowing them to become their true selves. Their divergence from norms becomes punished and ‘corrected’, forcing them to search for other ways of expression. Their relationship to the screen becomes a tool for imagining different, more freeing futures. Casey gets to create a new screen-mediated self outside of the bounds of who she is otherwise allowed to be. Owen finds himself represented by a TV show, showing him a side of himself he isn’t otherwise permitted to access. The *World’s Fair Challenge* and *the Pink Opaque* help our characters ‘manage painful disjunctions between their personal truths and social realities.’¹⁷ They cannot find their true selves in an antagonistic world that pushes them into an alienated corner; instead, they have to use that corner as an escape, this corner taking the shape of technology and the screen.

At the end of *I Saw the TV Glow*, Owen, now in his thirties, has a breakdown at work. He finally has to acknowledge that he’s dying, and at last gets the courage to open himself up and check what’s inside. What he finds is what Maddy promised him: instead of a heart, he finds the bright glow of a TV screen. After running away for decades, he finally comes face-to-face with the realization of who he is – rediscovering what *the Pink Opaque* taught him all those years ago.

¹⁶ Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life*, p. 25

¹⁷ Benson-Allott, p. 63

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Filmography

- *A Self-Induced Hallucination*, dir. by Jane Schoenbrun (Independently released, 2018)
- *We're All Going to the World's Fair*, dir. by Jane Schoenbrun (Utopia, 2021)
- *I Saw the TV Glow*, dir. by Jane Schoenbrun (A24, 2024)