

The Different Representation of Sexuality in New Queer Cinema And Boy's Love Cinema

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In the late twentieth century, New Queer Cinema as a new genre of film started to enter public arena. However, it was usually distinguished from mainstream cinema because of its attitude of defiance (Aaron 3). In the early 2000s, some directors, such as Gregg Araki, tried to bring New Queer Cinema into the mainstream film industry with his work *Mysterious Skin* (2004). Around the same period, independent filmmakers in Taiwan are struggling to find their niche market. In effect, the gay-themed genre was considered as a potential genre for mainstream market (Shiau 169). Leste Chen, one of the filmmakers, attempted to attract the gay audience market with his gay-themed romantic movie *Eternal Summer* (2006). Compared these two movies, I will argue that *Mysterious Skin* (2004) and *Eternal Summer* (2006) have a different representation of sexuality because their genres are actually different. The former one suggests that sexuality is ambiguous, and the latter one suggests heteronormativity. Hence, even though they both depict homosexuality, New Queer Cinema is not the same genre as Boy's Love Cinema.

In *Mysterious Skin* (2004), the representations of sexuality subvert the stereotype of homosexuality. Some stereotypes about homosexuality suggest that all homosexuals are feminine, or all homosexuals will die in AIDS. However, there is not single type of homosexuality. In this film, for example, Neil is masculine and Eric is feminine, but they are both homosexual. *Mysterious Skin* (2004) does not depict a romantic love story; instead, it examines the repression and self-exploration of a homosexual man Neil and a sexually repressed man Brian (Tziallas 28). A baseball coach sexually abuses Neil and Brian in their childhood. After this event, Brian loses his memory of the trauma, and believes that aliens kidnapped him. His nose bleeds once he tries to recall that memory. However, the two boys,

Neil and Brian, live in different families, they grow up with two distinctive personalities. Compared to *Eternal Summer* (2006), *Mysterious Skin* (2004) does not focus on tangled romantic relationships between characters. It actively explores the sexual development of both characters. First, the effect of sexual abuse on the development of homosexuality remains unknown, because Neil and Brian have different sexualities. Neil is openly gay, and Brian is sexually repressed. Secondly, even though Neil and Brian live in the same small town, they are in very different spaces. Neil comes from a single-parent family, and is brought up by his mother. The missing role of father forms a relatively free space for Neil to develop his own sexuality, in effect, Neil ultimately becomes an underground hustler who is sexually active and financial independent (Tziallas 33). On the other side, Brian grow up in a very suffocating home space which, within the film's context, comes to represent his repressed sexuality (Tziallas 33). His sexual orientation remains unknown in the whole film. This film suggests that sexuality is not determined by one single event, particularly sexual abuse in this film.

In *Eternal Summer* (2006), sexuality is represented by heteronormativity and repressed homosexuality. On the one hand, *Eternal Summer* (2006) adheres to the conventions of Boy's Love Cinema with two attractive males where the androgynous boy is Jonathan, and the masculine boy is Shane. On the other hand, an unconventional female character is involved to enhance heterosexual norms. Nevertheless, a girl named Carrie gets in triangular relationship with Jonathan and Shane. Carrie discovers Jonathan's homosexuality when they try to have sex. Although Carrie knows that Jonathan loves Shane, she finally has a relationship with Shane who is a heterosexual male. In addition, Jonathan's

family and the society repress his homosexuality. In effect, the heterosexual culture prevails. As a result, *Eternal Summer* (2006) suggests, “heterosexuality is historically positioned as normal and correct” (Tziallas 25).

Representations of sexuality in *Mysterious Skin* (2004) conform to New Queer Cinema. First of all, this film is unapologetic about the negative queer characters it portrays (Aaron, 2004). For example, it never depicts that Neil feels wrong about being gay. Secondly, New Queer Cinema gives voice not only to homosexual community, but also to all the sub-groups (Tziallas 24). It is significant that not all of the characters in this film are white or middle-class. Ultimately, the core of this film and the core characteristic of New Queer Cinema as well is that homosexuality is not an easily definable category. New Queer Cinema attempts to erase the stereotype of homosexuality in people’s minds, and claims that homosexuals can be various. Araki blurs the socially constructed binary oppositions of bourgeois sexuality (Tziallas 22). In other words, heterosexuality and homosexuality cannot be defined by physical or social science. For example, viewers cannot judge whether Brian is homosexual or not by his feminine behavior and nerd appearance. Moreover, although Neil and Brian went through sexual abuse in their childhood, Brian did not necessarily become homosexual as well. Therefore, all of these characteristics well explain why the representation of sexuality is unique in *Mysterious Skin* (2004).

Representations of sexuality in *Eternal Summer* (2006) conform to Boy’s Love Cinema. There is a comment in Shiau’s paper stating, “This film can be seen as typical BL (Boy’s Love) comics as its storyline includes a clean-cut, pretty, and androgynous boy hitting on a masculine, sportive childhood playmate” (164). Obviously, *Eternal Summer* (2006) is

more likely to be a romantic gay-themed movie rather than queer movie, as this movie does not give voice to gay community. Since Chen attempts to expand the market for gay-themed movies, he concentrates on feminine interests with BL materials. Popular BL subculture in Taiwan exists in various media. Boy's Love material often depicts two attractive males who are attracted to each other, and they develop romantic love with each other (Shiau 164). Under the East Asian context, Boy's Love Cinema provides a way for women to escape the specific and strict standards that are imposed on females (Shiau 165). Since homosexual love is more forbidden in Asian society, Boy's Love material has been an "escapist staple" for women (Shiau 165). When homosexuality is repressed, women feel sympathy for those homosexual characters. As this film aim to enter mainstream market and attract all kinds of audiences, heteronormativity must be the representation of sexuality. As a result, Boy's Love Cinema enhances the patriarchy that imposes on both males and females and even does not offend the heterosexual mainstream.

As a result, masculinity is a very important notion in homosexual-themed movies, because the masculine role is often depicted as the dominant role. However, Araki and Chen treat masculinity differently in their movies. Araki suggests that femininity and masculinity are not polar opposites and that masculinity is a type of performance (Tziallas 32). In *Mysterious Skin* (2004), Neil is a homosexual, and he behaves in masculine way; Eric is also a homosexual, and he behaves in feminine way; Brian is feminine, but viewers even cannot tell what his sexuality exactly is. Araki blurs and complicates the definitions and boundaries of sexuality, suggesting that machismo representations are neither natural nor straight (Tziallas 32). For Chen, he clearly distinguishes masculinity and femininity in *Eternal*

Summer (2006). Boy's Love materials tend to identify two male characters in a dominant role or submissive role, and depict one or both males as feminine or androgynous (Shiau 164). In this film, as every heterosexual romantic movie suggests, the dominant role is masculine, and the submissive role is feminine. Edward also states, "gay sexuality negates masculinity" (79). For instance, the scenes where Shane is playing basketball with his team appear several times in this movie, because playing basketball is a classical way of constructing masculinity. In comparison, Jonathan is depicted as feminine because he is homosexual. He only joins the school magazine and inactively attends masculine activities such as basketball. Therefore, the ways the films construct sexuality partly depend on how they present gender roles.

In terms of the form of showing homosexuality, according to Tziallas, *Mysterious Skin* (2004) is neither a humanist nor an assimilationist movie (22). It does not give empathy for queer characters, and it does not advocate that every individual from cultural minority groups should assimilate to the larger cultural groups. For example, although every character comes from different backgrounds, they respect each other's lifestyles. In contrast, *Eternal Summer* (2006) is a very humanist movie that wants sympathy from audiences. Humanist perspective, according to Tziallas, presents the homosexuality in the way of "we are just like you fashion" (26). Thus, the movie simply implies that Jonathan is just as normal as everyone else; even though he is homosexual, he should have the right to love the boy he wants. In other words, heterosexual culture should coexist with homosexual culture. Nevertheless, this implication attempts to construct homosexuality in a clinché fashion, assuming that gay culture is similar to heterosexual culture (Tziallas 26).

Mysterious Skin (2006) film raises a question for viewers without answering it: how

does homosexuality develop in Western culture? (Tziallas 28) Western society is thought to be more advanced and civilized than others in many ways, particularly in terms of culture, technology, and art. New Queer Cinema is very representative form of the liberal Western culture. It does not advocate heterosexism, it advocate the diversities of sexualities (Tziallas 25). New Queer Cinema suggests a new ideology that states that homosexual culture is not alternative to heterosexual culture, but an additional aspect of sexuality and culture (Tziallas 25). On the other hand, the popularity of Boy's Love materials in Taiwan illustrates the social structure of Taiwan. The patriarchal ideology still deeply embeds not only in women's mind but also in men's mind. Boy's Love Cinema depicts a picture of two men in an unequal relationship just like a heterosexual couple. It suggests that homosexual culture is alternative to heterosexual culture.

Although *Mysterious Skin* (2004) and *Eternal Summer* (2006) both engage with the issue of homosexuality, their representations of homosexuality differ because they conform to the conventions of two very different genres, whereas *Mysterious Skin* (2004) conforms to New Queer Cinema, and so focuses on deconstructing heterosexism and subverting the stereotypes of homosexuality, *Eternal Summer* (2006) conforms to Boy's Love Cinema, and so privileges the patriarchy settings and romantic love. These conventions also impact the social and political implications of the films in terms of humanist and assimilationist, gender roles, and Western and Eastern cultural contexts.

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