

CASE STUDY: *THE LIVING END* (GREGG ARAKI, 1993)

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Genre and anarchy

Gregg Araki began his film-making career in 1987 producing quirky short films which directly challenged the conventions of classic narrative. *The Living End*, his first feature-length work, follows more conventional narrative patterns. However, the film uses traditional genre elements of the road movie, with comedy and romance, in unusual, offbeat and sometimes outrageous ways.

In the opening shot of the film we see Luke, a gorgeous young man in torn jeans, leather jacket and Ray Ban sunglasses, spraying 'Fuck The World' on a wall, an image which sets the anarchic tone of the film. We immediately cut to the other main character, Jon, writing 'the first day of the rest of my life' in his diary, an entry explained for us with the mechanical-sounding voice-over of the doctor explaining to Jon that he is HIV+. The film's offbeat attitude to HIV and death is indicated when Jon says; 'Live fast, die young, leave a beautiful corpse - yeah right. Death is weird.'

Jon's friend Doris is seen hugging him, comforting him and offering help. Throughout the film she worries about him, even as she is breaking up with her boyfriend, but we see little indication of her state of mind other than her nervously playing with an executive toy. That, and the scene of her concentrated work on her painting, indicates the similarity of her world and Jon's. Her feelings for Jon are portrayed as warm and concerned, but she has a limited role within the film as foil and support for Jon.

Later, Jon picks Luke up in his car. Their conversation reveals Jon's conventional attitudes and Luke's anger. Jon invites Luke home to his apartment. Andy Warhol posters, a large blow-up dinosaur and the word processor indicate Jon's playfully arty lifestyle. Jon starts clearing his things away and Luke points out that he is being paranoid. The differences in personality and outlook between the two young men are further underlined with Luke's lack of interest in Derek Jarman and in the way he casually strips before an embarrassed Jon.

When Luke and Jon begin to make love, Luke shows himself to be sensitive to Jon's uptightness. Jon falteringly starts to explain: '...I just found out this afternoon that ...' Luke's tone is firm and affectionate: 'If you're trying to say what I think you are, don't worry about it.' With a kiss, he says: 'It's really no big deal.' He switches off the light and says: 'Welcome to the club, partner.' Being HIV+ is seen as a continuing lifestyle.

Luke goes on to point out that there must be millions of people like them walking 'with this thing inside them', that he, Jon and people like them have nothing to lose, are totally free, and can do whatever they want, whereupon he produces a credit card which he says is his uncle's.

Audience reactions

These scenes evoke conflicting audience reactions of outrage and laughter. Daisy chats Luke up in order to anger her girlfriend, calling him 'a sexy slab of hunk beefcake'. Fern stops the car and threatens to blow Luke's face to smithereens. The script pushes the man-hating lesbian stereotype to comic extremes with Daisy's descriptions of the painful deaths she and Fern have inflicted on previous victims, right to the point where Fern says; 'You got me so agitated with all this talk, I gotta pee'. She tells Daisy not to kill Luke until she gets back 'and no more flirting'. Daisy's line, 'I love it when she gets jealous', caps their over-the-top comic dialogue. The two women are strong foils for each other, and Daisy cares enough for Fern to run to her aid when she calls. The ambiguities of

queer theory come to the fore here. Tamsin Wilton (see Further Reading, p. 273, the textbook) points out the misogyny in this portrayal as Luke abandons the two women in the middle of the desert and symbolically appropriates the phallus in the form of their car and their gun.

The outrageous humour continues as we see the wife of the bisexual man bursting into the bedroom where he is sleeping with Luke. She informs her husband bitterly that 'It's not the seventies any more when being married to a bisexual was fashionable'. We see a low-angle shot of her holding a large knife in both hands and producing a tarzanic scream, then cut to a splash of blood hitting Luke's face and a series of unexpected shots which culminates in Luke leaving the house, chased by the dog. The combination of skilful editing, Psycho-references and offbeat subject-matter make for unsettling comedy.

The scene where Luke shoots the three queer-bashers could well represent a form of wish-fulfilment. He is confronted with three baseball-wielding thugs: 'Prepare to swallow your teeth, faggot, it's cosmetic surgery time.' He stops them in their tracks when he takes out a gun. First, he calmly shoots the one who tries to run away, then the other two. Luke becomes a liberating hero figure through expressing his anger, from spraying graffiti to bashing a skinhead who makes a gross AIDS joke, a kind of queer hero. Jon's life is transformed once he commits himself to Luke, but his commitment only comes gradually. He goes along with the mad credit card spending spree but throws Luke out after the skinhead-bashing incident, only to discover that he can't live without him.

Motivation and character

The motivation for the two lovers hitting the road is typical of the road movie genre; a crime from whose consequences they need to flee. In this case, Luke admits that he has killed a policeman and they set off for San Francisco. The contrasts between the two characters surface. As with much comic representation, traditional stereotypes lurk near the surface. Jon is the prissy queen and Luke the butch, street-wise hustler. Luke calls Jon a 'princess' because of his precise bathing habits. Jon declares he's fed up with Luke's 'Clint Eastwood act with the gun'. Meanwhile, the familiar genre imagery of open spaces viewed from a speeding car embodies Jon's ever-growing distance from his old life. Doris, checking his apartment back home, finds an answer phone full of unanswered messages and a dead goldfish. Luke writes 'Jon and Luke-Till Death Do Us Part' on a phone box and Jon confides by phone to Doris; 'I don't know how to describe it. Nothing is the same any more. Everything has changed.'

A romantic ending?

The final sequence presents us with images that are both disquieting and romantic. Luke cuts his wrist to examine his own blood, the source of his HIV anxiety. Jon, angry and exasperated, still binds Luke's wound. The gun becomes a sexual toy as Luke caresses Jon with it and places it in his own mouth while rubbing himself between Jon's legs.

The final long-shot is of the two together peacefully on the beach with just the sound of the sea, a shot which implies a peaceful but questionable final equilibrium. The playful waywardness of this film, its gleeful man-killers, unsafe shower sex, amoral attitudes and discomfiting treatment of AIDS, make it a central text of the New Queer Cinema. To what extent do Araki's unusual methods of comic exaggeration make viewers aware of the tensions, anger and survival strategies associated with being young, gay and HIV+?