

**Queer Time and Space:
Heteronormativity Refused in *Bound* and *The Doom Generation***

Krish Chopra

The physical domains, space and time, of the canonical *films noirs* are shot at thresholds: a man stands at a doorway, a woman is framed by a window, and citylights flutter or sleep. All interior spaces work to confine its women, and that confinement works in tandem with a forward running clock counting down the time toward a doom that requires a couple to consummate, betray one another, or unravel. Heteronormativity is, in effect, the architectural foundation upon which noir is built. The Wachowski's *Bound* (1996) and Gregg Araki's *The Doom Generation* (1995) both upend this architecture by using space and time to speak to the characters' sexuality as they circulate within a heterosexual world. *Bound* compresses noir space until the heterosexual domestic space becomes carceral, and the queer couple's eventual escape holds its potency as a result of the film's spatial confinement before the fact. *Doom Generation*, on the other hand, replaces noir's forward fatalism with episodic drift, ultimately equating the survival of its queer trio with the film's resistance to temporal closure. Each film contends for a different response to noir's heteronormative substrate. Together, they both show and denounce the genre's homophobia as inherent to its textural and spatio-temporal workings.

Jack Halberstam, in *In a Queer Time and Place*, provides a cogent account of queer temporality and queer space. "Queer time," he writes, names "those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance." Further, "queer space" designates "the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage."¹ Both concepts, in effect, point to a singular dependency for heteronormativity. Namely, heteronormativity organizes the social through what counts as a livable arrangement of time and what counts as a livable arrangement of space. In Lee Edelman's formulation, heteronormativity

¹ Jack Halberstam, "Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies," in *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York University Press, 2004), 6. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20107133>.

operates as “reproductive futurism,” organizing politics around the figure of the Child as the unquestionable standard of value. “There are no queers in that future as there can be no future for queers,” he writes.² The canonical noir hero descends toward death as a result of desire, a desire that has betrayed him and his reproductive future. That very reproductive future, which supports the heteronormative ideal, is noir’s protective subject, and the femme fatale dies as a result of her threat to that subject. B. Ruby Rich’s account of the New Queer Cinema elucidates the “Homo Pomo” cohort as “renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories” through “appropriation, pastiche, and irony,” as well as a restaging of history on “social constructivist” terms.³ *Bound* and *Doom Generation*, in this respect, participate in a moment of noir’s self-reflection where the genre is reworked at the layer Halberstam and Edelman identify as the heteronormative core of noir cinema.

In *Bound*, the space of the noir domain exists as a heterosexual home. As the film goes on, that domain is compressed, ultimately manifesting as the prison it had always been. The film opens with Corky (Gina Gershon) bound and gagged inside Violet’s (Jennifer Tilly) closet. This image announces the spatial logic of everything to follow. A queer subject confined inside the heterosexual home’s most symbolically charged interior: the closet. The entire film takes place within two adjacent apartments, Caesar and Violet’s, where the mob’s spatial logic extends into domestic life through Caesar, and the unit Corky is hired to renovate, a queer counter-space carved out next door. The Wachowskis have said the film is about “the boxes people make of their lives,” and that “it is not only gay people who live in closets.”⁴ Herein, Halberstam’s “queer

² Lee Edelman, “The Future Is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive,” *Narrative* 6, no. 1 (1998): 29.

³ B. Ruby Rich, “Origins, Festivals, Audiences,” in *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Duke University Press, 2013), 16, 18.

⁴ Lily Wachowski and Larry Wachowski, “Glory Bound an Interview with Larry and Andy Wachowski,” interview by Nat Whilk and Jason Whitehead, *Gadfly*, 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/20040301035225/http://www.gadflyonline.com/archive-wachowski.html>.

space” as “place making practices” finds testimony in Corky’s literal renovation labor while building a queer safe-space adjacent to the heterosexual home. The body motifs, moreover, underline this spatial tension. In *Bound*, hands operate as the instruments of queer pleasure, in the seduction scene where Corky retrieves Violet’s earring from the sink, in the long-take love scene, in the wordless coordination of the final heist itself. Fingers, by contrast, are what Caesar cuts off, first as the mob’s punishment for Shelly’s theft, then as the homophobic threat he makes the Violet after discovering her affair with Corky. The same hands used for seduction in a queer coupling are threatened with dismemberment, highlighting the film’s use of bodies in different spatial contexts to function as queer signifiers. Furthermore, the genre’s heteronormative spatial architecture is preserved entirely, but that very preservation is what lets Violet and Corky resist it. When they drive away with the money at the end of the film, the camera does not follow them onto an open road, nor does it track or spell out their intentions after the fact. Rather, it simply lets them out of the building that incarcerated their queerness.

In a similar interplay of time and noir form, *The Doom Generation* is structured as drift, as episodic stops at Quickie-Marts and motels and parking lots. What exists amongst the characters then is a present tense without a telos, without a clear end in sight. The trio, Amy Blue, Jordan White, and Xavier Red, the American flag broken into surnames, live entirely outside Edelman’s reproductive futurism. As is spelled out through dialogue, they have no past worth returning to and no concrete future to protect. This condition is reflected in the film as political rather than intrinsic within their characters. Robin Wood reads the film as a defense of cinematic principle, arguing that the trio’s progression toward “polymorphous perversity” is the film’s political delimitation, and that the climactic violence in a moment of queer coupling is the

necessary initiator of that progression rather than its refutation.⁵ Halberstam's "queer time" further describes the film's temporal modality as a present that has left "the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance."⁶ The film, then, cannot survive in this noir time because heteronormative, homophobic America, the America of the figural Child, requires that "a sexuality that's unconventional must be destroyed," as Araki has himself put it.⁷ When the neo-nazis arrive when the trio finally consummates, they rape Amy on an American flag while the national anthem plays, and castrate Jordan with shears, killing him. In effect, *Doom Generation* closes the film temporally by an external force the film itself did not let in. The queer trio spends ninety minutes refusing to play into that force, but as they drive away into the bleak terrain, they have no future possible, with none claimed. The queer time spent over the course of the film is ultimately rendered cyclical, broken only by forceful violence by heteronormativity and political reproductive idealism.

What canonical noir's homophobia depended on was the genre's organization of space and time around the heterosexual subject's mobility and futurity. *Bound*, in resisting this, compresses that space to expose the carcerality imbued within the political noir image. The queer couple ultimately escapes it by playing into that organization, rather than outwardly resisting it. Further, *The Doom Generation* refuses to be subject to noir time until heteronormative America has to impose closure by force, and the queer trio survives only as long as the film continues to resist the genre's clock, at the striking of which must come punishment. Each of these films leaves the intrinsic heteronormativity of noir exposed, refusing the "kind of mythology" James

⁵ Robin Wood, "Finale: 'The Doom Generation,'" in *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond* (Columbia University Press, 1998), 341.

⁶ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 6.

⁷ Gregg Araki, interview by Andre Juno, *Filmmaker Magazine*, 1995.

Naremore identifies as the genre's afterlife in postmodern culture and replacing it with a critique that mythology was meant to obscure.⁸

⁸ James Naremore, "The History of an Idea," in *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Univ of California Press, 1998).

Bibliography

Araki, Gregg. "Interview." *Filmmaker Magazine*, 1995.

Edelman, Lee. "The Future Is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive." *Narrative* 6, no. 1 (1998): 18–30.

Halberstam, Jack. "Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies." In *In a Queer Time and Place*. New York University Press, 2004. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20107133>.

Naremore, James. "The History of an Idea." In *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*. Univ of California Press, 1998.

Rich, B. Ruby. "Origins, Festivals, Audiences." In *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*. Duke University Press, 2013.

Wachowski, Lily , and Lana Wachowski. "Glory Bound an Interview with Larry and Andy Wachowski." Interview by Nat Whilk and Jason Whitehead. *Gadfly*, 1998.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20040301035225/http://www.gadflyonline.com/archive-wachowski.html>.

Wood, Robin. "Finale: 'The Doom Generation.'" In *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond*. Columbia University Press, 1998.