

A Doom Generation Parable

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Craig Gilmore, standing, and Mike Dytri play lovers on the lam in Gregg Araki's *The Living End*.

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The first thing you see on the screen when viewing *The Living End* (1992) is the phrase “An Irresponsible Movie by Gregg Araki.” The film made its debut at Sundance in 1992, a watershed moment for the so-called New Queer Cinema movement. Other gay-themed features that shared the bill at Park City that year were *Swoon*, Tom Kalin’s period, black-and-white meditation based on the Leopold and Loeb kidnap/murder case, and Christopher Munch’s *The Hours and Times*, a fictionalized account of John Lennon’s holiday in Spain with the Beatles’ closeted gay manager, Brian Epstein.

But it was Araki’s film that was the most audacious, helping break open the floodgates in its explicitly frank depiction of queer sexuality. The movie centers on two lovers on the run: Jon, a film critic who has just learned that he’s HIV positive, and Luke, a nihilistic hustler with a gun and some scores to settle with society. It was described by some as a “gay *Thelma and Louise*,” but its gritty, grainy, guerilla sensibility couldn’t be further removed from a Ridley Scott production.

Produced by Jon Gerrans and Marcus Hu, co-presidents of Strand Releasing, *The Living End* revels in its unvarnished, Godardian take on LA’s LGBTQ subculture and its excoriating view of the Bush 1 years and its handling of the HIV crisis. It also takes a cheeky swipe at mainstream cinema and the prevailing indie film movement.

In the film, Jon is in the midst of writing an essay on “The Death of Cinema,” and there are references to gay cinema pioneers Andy Warhol and Derek Jarman. In one scene, Luke kills three assailants wearing T-shirts emblazoned with *Drugstore Cowboy* and *Sex Lies, and Videotape*, one donning a cap with an Avenue Pictures logo.

So it’s a tad ironic that *Drugstore Cowboy* director and fellow New Queer Cinema proponent Gus Van Sant led a recent UCLA Film & Television Archive panel on the 30th anniversary of *The Living End*, with Araki reminiscing about the movement’s nascent days with a fellow filmmaker he clearly admires. Araki, a quintuple-threat producer-filmmaker whose Desperate Pictures dates back to 1989, called *The Living End* “very much a response to the AIDS crisis and Bush and Reagan,” equating it with the burgeoning activism of ACT UP and Queer Nation, “and is infused with that passion and anger.”

Emboldened by what he called “fearless queerness” and a punk-rock attitude, Araki—often with just Hu, Gerrans and a Bolex camera as crew—squeezed every penny out of their resources. “We were so broke,” recalls Hu, “that we ended up sending the film to (*Dazed and Confused* director) Rick Linklater and he actually shot Texas footage for us and sent it back.” The film was intended to chronicle a Kerouac-like cross-country road trip, but LA stood in for most of the locations.

Of that time, Araki recalled the sense of “dread and anxiety, and what it was like to be 25 or 30 years old and feel like you’re in a fucking war zone, and people were just dropping dead on the street. There was literally a black cloud over everybody, and it was something you thought about on a daily basis.” ■