

‘I Believe in Ketchup!’: Girlhood, Punk, and Moodysson’s *We are the Best!*

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Abstract

This article engages with the field of girlhood studies to offer a reading of Lukas Moodysson’s feature film *Vi är bäst!* (*We are the Best!*, 2013). Two intertwined yet apparently political and cultural systems are examined: the Swedish secular, egalitarian welfare states of the 1930s to the 1970s, often called *Folkhemmet* (the People’s Home), and the first-wave Punk movement from the late 1970s and early 1980s, imported from abroad but itself a significant youth subculture in Sweden. Punk offers the possibility of new forms of inclusion and participation within a musical subgenre or movement for girls and young women; in the Swedish context, this allows girls and young women to imagine a position outside the consensus culture. However, in line with Moodysson’s other films, *We are the Best!* does not challenge heteronormative paradigms in ways that are unproblematic or necessarily radical.

Keywords

Lukas Moodysson, *We are the Best!* (film), girlhood, punk, folkhemmet

Set in Stockholm in 1982, Lukas Moodysson's *Vi är bäst!* (*We are the Best!*, 2013) continues his exploration of girlhood, first examined in critically acclaimed debut feature *Fucking Åmål* (*Show Me Love*, 1998) and developed further in the international award-winning *Lilja 4-ever* (2002). *We are the Best!* focuses on the lives of Bobo (Mira Barkhammar), Klara (Mira Grosin), and Hedvig (Liv Lemoyne), three thirteen year-old girls who decide to form a Punk rock band. The film is based on Coco Moodysson's graphic novel *Aldrig Godnatt* ('Never Goodnight,' 2008), which reflects in part the author's own girlhood experiences of being a member of the Punk band Andra Kammaren (The Second Chamber) and the emerging Stockholm Punk scene of the early 1980s. The first-person graphic novel and the film-script align in significant ways, including thematizing frustration with all power structures that seem to limit the girls' agency: parents, schools, peers, and the community youth centre.

We are the Best! can be read as a contribution to an increasing medialized attention to girls and adolescent women, what Sarah Projansky calls in a recent work the 'spectacularization of girlhood' (Projansky 2014: 6). Up until now, the nascent field of girlhood studies has not engaged with Moodysson's works, despite his highly original representation of their lives and voices. Notably, he portrays girls as complex, contradictory and rich characters whose lives merit attention on their own, rather than as objects of what Laura Mulvey and many others have characterized as the heterosexual male gaze (see Stenport 2012 for an extended discussion of this). Needless to say, *We are the Best!*, *Lilja 4-ever*, and *Show Me Love* all pass with flying colours the Bechdel test, which stipulates that a film: 1. 'has to have at least two women in it; 2. who talk to each other; 3. about something besides a man' (Associated Press 2013). That does not mean, however, that Moodysson's films are unproblematic or necessarily radical in their challenge to heteronormative paradigms, nor that they confront the trappings of mediated girlhood head on.

What continues to make Moodysson a relevant and interesting filmmaker is demonstrated in *We are the Best!* through its foregrounding of the profound ambivalence of the cultural and political ramifications of the status of girlhood within the context of Western late-modernity.

In this article we engage with girlhood studies to trace the confluences and intertexts between the conflicting accounts and discourses of Punk, gender roles, and the Swedish welfare state that shape Moodysson's film. For example, Punk offers the possibility of new forms of inclusion and participation within a musical subgenre or movement for girls and young women. In the Swedish context, this allows for girls and young women to imagine a position outside the consensus culture. Like Moodysson's other works, his character portrayal is more complex than first assumed. To this end, we examine two intertwined, yet seemingly contradictory political and cultural systems. One is usually understood to be profoundly Swedish – the secular, egalitarian welfare state of the mid-twentieth century (the 1930s through to the 1970s, also called *Folkhemmet* [the People's Home]) – and the other, imported from the outside – the first-wave Punk movement from the late 1970s and early 1980s.

This is What Girls Want?

While girlhood studies has been labeled as at risk of 'reproducing the common perception that girls' media culture is always already commercial' (Kearney 2011: 11), the field is much more complex. As many scholars show, dominant tropes of the representation of girlhood in contemporary popular film and television fall into two main (dichotomous) categories. These are, Projansky argues: the 'can-do girl' who is white, affluent, competent, smart, healthy, sporty, and heterosexual, but not hypersexual; and the 'at-risk girl', who is of an ethnic minority, impoverished, failing in school, a drug user, a victim of her disenfranchised upbringing, pregnant (or, hypersexual), and, passive (2014: 2). These two tropes align with what Projansky and others see as a conceptual bifurcation of the roles girls play in, for, and through popular culture and media, namely, what constitutes the contradictions of 'intense publicness of contemporary girlhood' (7). This publicness can be understood in two ways: girls as consumers, and girls as 'spectacularized' mediated images. As consumers of mass-audience, broadcast or digitally networked popular culture content, designed and marketed specifically to them, they are an attractive consumer group

(by dint of which they are interpellated by neoliberalism and capitalist consumerism). Yet they are also 'spectacularized' through those same media. This becomes an especially poignant figuration because as girls, their mediatization/spectacularization glosses over the inherent contradictions of dominant capitalist and patriarchal paradigms. Girls become convenient emblems for a world order that demands flexibility (including in work and sexual relationships), a profound interest in consumption, and the affirmation of commodified individualism.

An examination of *We are the Best!* is important for girlhood studies, as it raises a set of questions that often lie outside the American media studies approach to the field. When Bobo and Klara name their Punk band, they irreverently, unapologetically, and exuberantly call it 'Vi är bäst!' ('We are Best!'). And while girlhood studies considers musical sub-genres such as the early 1990s riot grrrls, which lie on the margins of popular music, it has, as yet, not examined these issues to any great degree in European art cinema (on riot grrrls and girlhood studies, see, for example, Haines 2012: 1-24). Striations and conflicting manifestations of contemporary girlhood, moreover, can be used to question two of the mutually supporting but seemingly contradictory strands of the narrative in Moodysson's *We are the Best!* While Moodysson's film partakes in the 'spectacularization' of girls, the film nevertheless seeks to challenge the very assumptions such spectacularization relies upon. It is therefore not surprising that Moodysson turned to Punk as his exemplar of these contradictions. Many historiographies of Punk (Savage 1991; Heylin 2005) celebrate the movement as an anti-capitalist, anti-spectacular approach to DIY music and fashion while at the same time recognizing the contradiction that it also used both capitalism (record contracts with EMI) and fashion (Vivienne Westwood's designs and Jamie Reid's record sleeves) to sell the music to the public.

In her study of Punk and female adolescence, Lauraine Leblanc writes compellingly about the freedom and pitfalls offered by the subculture. The many interviews she conducts can be seen as formative for the field of girlhood studies in the mid-1990s. Leblanc recounts one of her informants' widely shared experience with Punk in teenage years:

Like me, she felt troubled about the male-dominated gender dynamics in the punk subculture, a subculture that portrays itself as being egalitarian, and even feminist, but is actually far from being either. Yet, like me, she had found that this same sub-culture gave her a place to be assertive and aggressive, to express herself in less “feminine” ways than other girls. It is this paradox that led me to this research: on the one hand, punk gave us both a place to protest all manner of constraints; on the other, the subculture put many of the same pressures on us as girls as did the mainstream culture we strove to oppose. (Leblanc 1999: 6)

These conflicting sentiments are mobilized by the characters in *We are the Best!*

The Paradoxes of Punk

More so than the youth sub-cultures that preceded them in the UK (Mods, Rockers, Glam, pub rock, to name but a few) Punk was more inclusionary towards girls and women, in terms of at least allowing for the possibility of female audience members imagining that they too could make it onto the stage. The DIY ethos – all you need are three chords and a guitar – radically downplayed the ‘virtuosity’ that had become a hallmark of hard and prog rock in the early 1970s. With Punk, women formed their own bands to a higher degree, which broke with notion that women were fans, only, of male bands. This is clearly part of the diegesis in *We are the Best!*, with protagonist Bobo and her friend Klara starting a band without either of them knowing how to play an instrument. *We are the Best!* self-consciously and expressly connects to many of the dominant strategies of UK punk, subsequently emulated by punk bands around the world (the Sex Pistols themselves played eight dates in Sweden between July 15-28, 1977). This influence was evident on the Swedish all-male punk bands Ebba Grön (1977-1983) and KSMB (1977-1982), or the female-driven Tant Strul (1980-1985). The emergence of the Punk movement in the UK in 1975-1977 was filled with tensions and contradictions. Understood as, at least in part,

a working-class movement in its original UK instantiation (although many participants, both working and middle-class, went to art school), Punk in Sweden was practiced mostly by the upper-middle classes and became coded as an elite form of rebellion, especially when practiced by those who were at the time angry young men of some privilege. Thirty years later, many key figures play leading roles in the arts and in the public sphere, from academics to cultural critics.

The roles that young women could play within the subculture did not necessarily translate into equality, as Leblanc articulates throughout her book, and which resonates with the experience of women punk rockers in Sweden (Ganetz 1997; Grytt 2011). The way in which UK Punk dealt with sexism in part came down to anti-sex and anti-love rhetoric. At the height of Punk, Johnny Rotten famously described love as '2 minutes and 52 seconds of squelching noises'. By disavowing even the need for sex, more equality could be envisioned. Yet, this anti-sex and anti-love attitude only masked the usual disparities between men and women, even if the playing field had been leveled to some degree (See Dibbell 1995). This raises salient issues about Punk's deployment of androgyny, both in its UK iteration, and in appropriated versions as found in *We are the Best!* Is the androgyny of the young girls, as epitomized by their haircuts (and foregrounded in the movie poster), a means by which to disavow 'traditional' styles of femininity? And, is the best way to confront objectification to deny desirability? *We are the Best!* raises questions about these issues. Purported androgyny does not mean that the three girls want to be unattractive; instead they wish to be attractive on their own terms.

Disavow sex, make yourself 'ugly', androgynous and obviously made up: Punk foregrounded, or rather, made self-conscious, how much of teen identity formation is tied to performance and public personae (see Hebdige 1979: 106-111). On the other hand, embracing the androgynous figure of 'the robot' and pogoing implies that sexism is not an issue, Hebdige continues. Seen from the perspective of girlhood studies, the androgynous components of Punk ironically align with second-wave feminism in overlooking concerns of girls as particular, poignant, and emblematic, thereby compromising their agency and empowerment. Clearly the heteronormative framework is very strong

in *We are the Best!*, with Bobo and Klara, in particular, seemingly 'realistically' conforming insofar as they seek to be desired by the boys. This is arguably what makes *We are the Best!* a feel-good and post-feminist chick-flick. In that sense, as Kimberly Roberts argues, teenage angst can be only partly turned into anger: in mainstream popular culture and films about girls in particular 'anger is still largely taboo' (Roberts 2002: 218). And, feel-good, in the sense meant here, does not typically go hand-in-hand with traditional iterations of Punk, which draw upon irony, cynicism and inversion to such a great degree. On the other hand, *We are the Best!* foregrounds the quite joyous side of Punk, of the thrill of flaunting the idea of non-conformity and generating responses in others through humour by shocking parochial and paternalistic belief systems, to see how potentially weak and therefore arbitrary these structures are in the process.

While the soundtrack is a central part of the film's supposed authenticity, it also reveals some of the paradoxical gendered inequalities underlying Punk. This 'authentic' overlay of actual tunes, and cameo performances as community centre youth leaders by period rockers (Mattias Willborg and Johan Liljemark), support the film's realistic mode. The soundtrack covers a range of Swedish Punk (including Ebba Grön, Tant Strul, Ståålfågel) and 'singer-songwriter' hits (Ulf Lundell), as well as period tunes by UK Punk and new wave bands Joy Division and Echo and the Bunnymen. Yet, not one tune on the soundtrack is by a women's group or by women performers. This is remarkable and problematic, given the significance of music on a diegetic level of the film, and given the film's deliberate engagement with Punk as a movement with political potential. Though there were few all-women Swedish Punk bands at the time, Tant Strul is important in the Swedish Punk pantheon. Similarly, significant non-Swedish female-led bands such as The Slits (1976-1982), Siouxsie and the Banshees (1976-96), and X-Ray Spex (1976-1979) had national and international hits.

The paradoxes of *We are the Best!* chime with the paradoxes of Punk itself. As Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor note:

Punk was riddled with a series of paradoxes: it hymned

authenticity but relied heavily on simulation in public performance; it aspired to success on its own terms but it glamorized failure; its do-it-yourself aspect raised the issue of how to take and keep control in a genre that glorified the individual against the corporate machine; and it presented itself as a simple negation and something far more knowing. (Barker and Taylor 2007: 265)

Yet, unlike some of Moodysson's other films, like *A Hole in My Heart* (*Ett hål i mitt hjärta*, 2005), *We are the Best!* is not an instantiation of what Nicholas Rombes has called 'New Punk Cinema' (Rombes 2005), an international movement defined by its elliptical narratives, hand held cameras and DIY ethos. Instead, *We are the Best!* considers Punk and the questions it raises about identity and belonging within a realist art cinema paradigm. This approach is foregrounded as part of a long tradition of Swedish art film, including when focusing on children and youth protagonists.

This legacy of Swedish film is implicit in international commentary on *We are the Best!*, including in reviews in *The Guardian* (Romney 2014), *The New York Times* (Scott 2014), and *The New Yorker* (Brody 2014). The compelling realistic acting, distinctive cinematography by long-time Director of Photography Ulf Brantås, and attention to period setting have characterized many of Moodysson's works. In contrast to Moodysson's earlier films about girlhood (*Show Me Love* and *Lilya 4-ever*), *We are the Best!* did not earn any significant prizes at the annual Swedish Guldbagge awards, and sold only a moderate number of cinema tickets (80,000) in comparison to other Swedish films opening in 2013 (Svensk Filmdatabas). The only recognition came for scenography, with reviewers praising production design and costuming. The director himself, and indeed most reviewers in Sweden, commented extensively on how *We are the Best!*, like *Tillsammans* (*Together*, 2000) effortlessly seemed to evoke an authentic version of the past (e.g., Lindblad 2013; Åkerberg 2013). This seemingly 'effortless' authenticity hides the paradoxes and the inherently contrived nature not only of the exercise of recreating the past, but in recreating it as a uniquely liberatory period.

Pippi, Punk and *Folkhemmet*

Punk in *We are the Best!* is the vehicle for revolt, subversion, joy, and liberation. At the same time, Punk is subsumed and 'domesticated' within the hierarchy of the Swedish welfare state. Punk is primarily enacted through the municipal 'fritidsgård' youth community centre, where the girls fight to get access to rehearsal space and equipment, while combating what they see as a denigrating denomination of 'girl band'. They repeatedly affirm their right to be a Punk band. In the context of the community centre, and an organized 'Battle of the Bands' competition between Stockholm and Västerås youth bands, Punk becomes safe. Similarly, the girls are protected in light of their generally absent parents by the effeminate male youth centre leaders, and therefore face no risk from predatory older males or of rape. This is distinct from what UK music journalists Gina Rumsey and Hilary Little wrote about inequitably gendered Punk in the mid-1980s:

Punk's legacy of music dealing with the "real life," "combat rock," late-night encounters on urban streets, the pain and pride of solitary contemplation of the human condition, has the added peril for women of rape. This fear tends to detract from our feelings of excitement and exhilaration as we go to gigs wondering whether our friends will still be around at the end of the evening to get us home safely. Not only does this circumscribe our sense of being young, free and single – we do not have freedom of movement – but rape, unlike street-fighting has no glamour attached to it. (Rumsey and Little 1988 [1985]: 241-242)

In this context, Moodysson offers the story of a tamed, state-sanctioned 'street culture' where rebellion is fine if it happens in a safe place. The girls in Moodysson's film, however, embrace parts of what Punk sought to do with their rhetoric of overthrowing state, capitalist, and consumerist hegemony, but this rebellion is ensconced within a particular context, the consensus and (gender) egalitarian ideology of the Swedish welfare state as it was beginning to be dismantled in the

late 1970s.

In fact, resistance to feminist identification continues to be strong in majority Swedish culture, among both men and women. Though Sweden has repeatedly been ranked in the top five countries in the world for gender equality in the Global Gender Gap report (World Economic Forum), tensions persist, especially with respect to the everyday experience of gender equality. In addition, as the general political climate of Sweden has moved rightwards and in a populist direction in the last decade, feminist political initiatives have begun to carry a wider charge. For example, the party Feministiskt Initiativ (Feminist Initiative) has grown from being perceived as a limited fringe faction into a wider movement seeking political representation in the parliament not only because of its gender and queer equality platform, but also as a counter movement to neoliberal and racist political parties. This shows that the political culture in Sweden, as in many parts of Europe, is becoming polarised. In Sweden, it also has the additional connotation of breaking with a consensus culture and, as historian Yvonne Hirdman has argued, the gender inequality that has always been ingrained within the welfare state. Hirdman shows how female solidarity must be suppressed in the Swedish mainstream because of its taboo nature in what she calls the Gender System of the Welfare State (Hirdman 1998).

The Swedish version of the Welfare State rests squarely on the foundation of the nuclear family and of conceptualizing the state as equivalent to a modern family's domestic space, Hirdman continues. This is a central component of the *Folkhemmet* ideology. This ideology equates the family with the state and the state with a family. Hirdman writes of Social Democratic party leader Per Albin Hansson, the coiner of the term *Folkhemmet*, that he 'obviously got so enchanted by his metaphor – folkhemmet, The People's Home – that he used it [repeatedly]', including in a formative 1929 debate in Parliament in what was to become 'a famous sentence claiming that society ought to be like a big, welcoming home for everybody, where no one should be left out in the cold. Solidarity was the key word' (Hirdman 2010: 66). Questions raised by the supposition of the state as a welcoming home were guided by Fordist principles. To enact this principle, a

particularly effective answer was offered to the role of the supposedly liberated women in modern Swedish society:

Women should be useful, both as child rearers (rather than mothers) and as workers in society. It was an answer that trusted science, rationality, technology, behaviourism and trusted it as the only means to liberate women to become full participants in society. It was an answer that made women's knowledge – as mothers and as house-wives – unnecessary, superfluous, and even an obstacle to progress. (Hirdman 1998, 77-78)

One of the most cherished rebels of *Folkhemmet* is Astrid Lindgren's world-famous character Pippi Longstocking, who features in a long series of children's books. Yet as Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh (2010) argue, it is through the consensus characters in Lindgren's stories – the 'normal' children – that young readers identify, and not with the *übermensch* Pippi. As Berggren and Trägårdh note: 'The young reader – or listener – doesn't necessarily have to identify with Pippi, who is an unrealistic and unpredictable character, but can indeed fantasize about being Tommy or Annika and having an amazing playmate like Pippi' (2010: 11). Therefore, despite the pleasure of experiencing the adventures of the parentless, unrestrained, and invulnerable Pippi, children continue to identify with the stable, Swedish consensus-oriented model of the nuclear family. They continue: 'So, paradoxically Pippi both offers an extreme version of childhood autonomy and a resounding confirmation of the social order that surrounds her' (2010: 11). Alternately, revolt becomes constituted as accepting the rebel, rather than enacting a rebellion. In Sweden, then, identifying with Punk could be seen as celebrating individuality as revolt, while, of course, this identification is complex and contradictory. To be Punk is to conform to a different set of conceptual group rules: 'we all agree to be different together!' Punk thereby allows the girls in *We are the Best!* to some degree to identify with the fantasy of Pippi.

What happens, moreover, in this world view, is the eradication of childhood and adolescence as particular stages of development (this

is arguably why the boundary-crossing girl Pippi could be perceived as both fascinating and scary). Like the notion of the teenager, childhood, as it is contemporarily understood, was a social construct that also emerged in Sweden in the relative prosperity of the mid-twentieth century. In *We are the Best!* Bobo, Klara, and Hedvig rebel partially against what can be construed as misguided effects of 70s second wave feminism (absent fathers; deceived and lonely mothers). They take a stand against their family structures and domestic contexts but, by virtue of the very close approximation between state and family in *Folkhemmet*, they actually also rebel against the very assumptions of the Swedish welfare state. This at first may not be self-evident.

While British and Swedish Punk was quite often explicitly anti-statist and anti-capitalist, with songs like the Sex Pistols' 'God Save the Queen' and Ebba Grön's Punk cover of an early prog rock song into an inflammatory call to arms retitled 'Staten och kapitalet' ('The State and Capital'), the Punk rockers in *We are Best!* may not be seen as being, in the first instance, explicitly concerned with these issues. However, they adopt the vernacular and mode of address of Punk to critically analyze their own, lived social relations within Sweden's consensus-based, socially engineered society by protesting the way in which the State manifests itself within their lives. This is embodied primarily through their frustration with school and gym class in particular. This is evident in their first song 'Hata sport!' ('Hate Sport!'). Despite all the contradictions within the film, *We are the Best!* is a highly unusual, and quite radical work, in both Swedish and international film culture. In the Swedish context, it is unique precisely because it reveals from the perspective of girlhood the inherent contradictions (between gendered economic equality and the silencing of female voices of dissent) within the Welfare State ideology, including the de facto gender and income equity generated between 1930s-1970s, the era immediately preceding the moment in which the film is set. The film gives voice to young women to address this tension, and to do it in their own voices, and while demanding that these views be heard and understood on their own terms. In this sense, *We are the Best!* and *Show Me Love* are original and radical within global art cinema in their representation of girlhood.

Conclusion: 'I believe in ketchup!'

Moodysson appropriates the mediatization of twenty-first-century contemporary girlhood in *We are the Best!* to undercut what girlhood studies calls the 'spectacularization' of female adolescence. Instead, he focuses on the girls' outspoken declamation of seemingly arbitrary but deeply ingrained ideologies. *While We are the Best!* illustrates both the potential of Punk revolt and brings into relief gendered foundations of Swedish welfare state ideology, Moodysson, in this film, as in *Lilya 4-ever*, *A Hole in My Heart*, and *Container* (2006), situates mediatized popular culture in relation to faith and spirituality (see also Stenport's contribution in this volume). In the film, Hedvig's faith is much more of an outlier than Punk. Though Bobo and Klara initially ridicule Hedvig's Christianity, her beliefs are as rebellious as the attacks on the State embodied by the gym song 'Hata sport!' Hedvig, moreover, is ambiguously coded in terms of which Christian faith she adheres to. Is it the State Lutheran religion, or, a denomination such as Pentecostalism, which in the Swedish mainstream context is perceived as marginal or even weird? In terms of consensus culture, Bobo and Klara are initially just as intolerant toward Hedvig as others are toward them. As the director expresses in an interview: 'I think we need someone who is Christian to come in and save the situation. It's funny to me that a Christian girl saves Punk' (Åkerberg 2013: 50). Significantly, once she becomes part of the group, Hedvig does not recant on her beliefs; it is the other two girls who learn to accept her. Klara's defiant statement of atheism, 'I believe in ketchup!' is thus transformed into a punk affirmation of girlhood solidarity, precisely what the secular, liberal, and egalitarian Swedish welfare state ideology would disavow.

Note

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