

‘Even if you aren’t Swedish, even if you aren’t lesbian’: *Show Me Love* in Queer American Context

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Abstract

Concentrating on the film’s reception in the United States, this article analyses *Fucking Åmal* (*Show Me Love*, 1998) according to its status as a foreign film. The film’s two main themes, lesbian love story and small-town boredom, are explored, as well as the film’s connection to the genres of romantic comedy and the American teen movie. Applying queer theory I assert that the lesbian theme is central to *Show Me Love*, where the narrative’s acknowledgement and acceptance of the main characters’ queer identity transcends traditional gender roles and drives the transformation of heteronormative space and community into queer space and community. The tendency of critics to downplay or disregard the lesbian theme while emphasizing the film’s representation of small-town boredom and focusing on the film’s coming-of-age story ignores the radical transformative power of queer acceptance and acknowledgement in general discourse. In my analysis I question the ethical and societal consequences of such readings, exploring the discourse surrounding *Show Me Love* since its release in the United States and asking why it matters to read *Show Me Love* as the lesbian representation it truly is.

Keywords

Lukas Moodysson, *Show Me Love* (film), gender, teen movie, queer theory

Lukas Moodysson's *Fucking Åmål* (1998), is a romantic teen comedy about budding lesbian love between two girls in a small town. It is as simple as that. And yet, it is not. Even in its home country of Sweden, the film was neither promoted nor received as a lesbian film, with comments and reviews rather emphasising the theme of small-town adolescence (Björklund 2009: 38), enabling Tiina Rosenberg to use the reception of the film as a 'case study' in 'Swedish heteronormativity' (Rosenberg 2006: 105). Upon its limited release in the United States in 1999 – the film's first release in an English speaking country and the primary focus of the ensuing analysis – *Fucking Åmål* was given the more prudent title of *Show Me Love* (henceforth used in this article) and predominantly promoted as the quaint foreign film that beat *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) at the box office in its home country (Warn 2002; Taylor 1999; Kuipers 2000). In line with their Swedish counterparts, American critics tended to emphasize the film's depiction of bored teenagers in a small town while largely ignoring the lesbian theme.

Concentrating on the film's reception in the United States, *Show Me Love* is here analysed according to its status as a foreign film in the context of critics' reviews as well as wider-ranging web references and online commentary. With an eye toward queer theory I assert that the lesbian theme is indeed central to *Show Me Love*, in which the narrative's acknowledgement and acceptance of the main characters' queer identity transcends traditional gender roles and drives the transformation of heteronormative space and community into queer space and community. Furthermore, as this transformation potentially benefits all involved, queer and straight alike, it demands inclusion in all discussion of the film rather than diminishing the importance of the lesbian theme. I argue that the insistence of American critics (as previously their Swedish counterparts) on downplaying or disregarding the lesbian theme while maintaining that the film's focus is a basic small-town coming-of-age story ignores the radical transformative power of queer acceptance and acknowledgement in general discourse. Although the intention may have been to boost the film's popularity among a general American audience by offering a 'safer', more mainstream reading, such reading actively works against

queer acceptance and re-establishes or maintains unchallenged heteronormative rule by effectively rendering the lesbian identity of the film's protagonists invisible. In my analysis I question the ethical consequences of such readings as I explore the discourse surrounding *Show Me Love* since its release, mostly through American reviews and online commentary from viewers, and ask why it matters to read *Show Me Love* as the lesbian representation it truly is.¹

Place, People and Genre

To acknowledge lesbianism and queer identity as central to *Show Me Love* is not to ignore the importance of the film's small-town theme. Indeed, the original title of *Fucking Åmål* neatly underscores the town's importance to the film and its plotline, although Åmål of *Show Me Love* is no more 'real' a location than is Azalea Springs of *It's in the Water* (Kelli Herd, 1997) or *The Truman's Show's* Sea Haven (Peter Weir, 1998). That there exists a Swedish town called Åmål is of little importance for most American viewers, first of all because *Show Me Love* does not attempt to present its location as unique or even specifically Swedish, but as universal and recognizable, and secondly because the film is not shot in Åmål but its neighbouring town of Trollhättan. In her book *Lukas Moodysson's Show Me Love*, Anna Westerståhl Stenport argues for the significance of 'the difference between the production location and the cinematic representation of location', especially due to the 'idea of local specificity embedded in *Show Me Love's* plot and production design' becoming 'a vehicle not only for rethinking national cultural connotations of the film industry but also for questioning a perception that a particular location could – or should – grant authenticity to the cinematic product' (Stenport 2012: 99). In the context of national cinema, authenticity of the cinematic product is unarguably a key point. However, emphases of national cinema are different from and here give way to the emphases intrinsic to a queer reading.

I argue that there are not one but two types of authenticity available to *Show Me Love* as a cinematic product. On the one hand we have the authenticity that emphasizes the 'real' place (i.e. Åmål/Trollhättan),

accessible to those who know the actual location or have some knowledge of Swedish geography and culture. In the context of the film's lesbian theme this authenticity is heteronormative, that is, secure in the real and the actual Swedish small-town norm. On the other hand, however, we have the authenticity of the generic and the recognisable, accessible to anyone who is able to relate to the idea, the construct of the small town, i.e. the town you 'know' precisely because it does not exist. This latter authenticity is just as important to most of the American audience as is Åmål's reality to many of the Swedish audience. American critics' focus on Åmål's recognisability as the quintessential small town confirms such a reading as they emphasise the generic to enable and encourage audience identification (Stack 1999; Ebert 2000). While it would be inaccurate to refer to this second authenticity as queer in itself, it has an embedded queerness to it because it is always already shaped by the viewer's experiences, interests and longings, thereby offering an alternative to the multifaceted weave of heteronormative practices (Rosenberg 2008: 10).

Albeit of Swedish origin, *Show Me Love* is accurately described by Stenport as 'a film that reflects prevailing trends of 1980s and 1990s Hollywood youth film', drawing 'quite explicitly on characteristics of the American teen movie genre' (Stenport 2012: 77). Jeff Millar of the *Houston Chronicle* accentuates this when he states that: 'It is an astonishment when one of the boys finishes putting exactly the right arc into the brim of his Nike ball cap, meets a buddy, opens his mouth and Swedish comes out' (1999). Concomitantly, the film adapts the American teen movie's conventional spaces, familiar to the American (and Swedish) audience: characters' homes and high school, public spaces of playgrounds, parking lots and sports arenas, the party scene at some hapless parents' home. Arguably this familiarity serves to support heteronormative practice, reading, and expectation. However, the setting of *Show Me Love* is effectively reduced to an extended high-school community connecting the characters' experiences within these spaces and their emotional reactions to the dullness and limitations of the small town, any small town.

Such reading is supported by Ulf Brantås's cinematography. For a film originally named after the town where it supposedly takes place,

Show Me Love is conspicuously void of any characterizing establishing shots depicting, for example, the Town Hall or the mall, classic long shots of the Main Street or aerial views of the town. Depictions of characters' homes serve mostly as basic backdrops and subtle confirmations of economic and class status. Not even the high school building, the closest to a central location this film has and a 'unifying location' for the American teen movie (Stenport 2012: 77), is granted an establishing shot. Rather, the audience is thrown directly into a chaotic start-of-day high school hallway by camerawork characterized by rapid cuts from medium shots to close ups to POVs and shot-reverse shots from a camera that persistently remains at characters' eye-level. Following the characters through hallways to classrooms and cafeteria, Brantås's camera presents the space through characters' experience, which indirectly implies this space does not exist without the characters.

Genre definitions are, to a great extent, defined by and based on Hollywood film. The genre status of *Show Me Love* in American context is, therefore, already complicated by it being a foreign film – it may not be particularly Swedish, but neither is it American. Both Tiina Rosenberg and Jenny Björklund argue for *Show Me Love* to be read like a romantic comedy, a genre characterized by tumultuous courtships which nevertheless lead inevitably towards a happy ending (usually marriage or the promise thereof), for compatible adult couples through their overcoming of obstacles, *Sleepless in Seattle* (Nora Ephron, 1993) and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994) providing classic examples of the genre (Rosenberg 2000; Björklund 2009: 39). According to Björklund, 'the audience will recognize the structure of the romantic comedy in *Show Me Love* and interpret it as a romantic comedy even if the couple happens to be lesbian' (Björklund 2009: 40). However, Björklund largely ignores the teenage component of the formula, identified by Stenport above, which invites us to consider some significant differences, most importantly the age of the protagonists. The leads of the teen romance are, as the term implies, teenagers and, as such, subject to a plethora of rules and restrictions placed upon them by adult society, no matter how absent from the film these adults may seem, for example in *Some Kind of*

Wonderful (Howard Deutch, 1987) or *She's All That* (Robert Iscove, 1999). Consequently, freedom, personal choices and movement of the teen romance film's characters are restricted, and to an extent inconceivable to the protagonists of the adult romantic comedy. In this context the centrality of the high-school community becomes not so much unifying as an effective reflection of (and a reaction to) the otherwise invisible adult society surrounding it.

Conversely to Björklund, Rosenberg dwells on the age of the protagonists and identifies the film's portrayal of adolescents as central to its popularity in Sweden, where critics 'unanimously praised *Show Me Love* as an excellent portrayal of young people' (2006: 112). But, as in the case of the town of Åmål, the authenticity of the characters of *Show Me Love* transcends their Swedish origin, as is evident from the majority of American critics claiming to find the film's representation of teenagers both true and identifiable. Many of these critics criticize the American teen romances in comparison, thus critiquing the genre even as they approvingly confirm *Show Me Love's* place within it. For example, Beth Armitage writes:

Teen romances are a dime a dozen in the U.S. They tend to focus on themes like alienation, individuality, and rebellion against parents, society, and/or high school cliques. *Show Me Love* focuses on all these themes – and so could be counted as a classic American teenage love story. This is notable because the movie is not U.S.-made, but Swedish, and because the love story concerns two girls. *Show Me Love* is also remarkable because it tells this story with complexity and emotional truth, something that strikes me as a rarity in the genre. (Armitage 1999)

Although Armitage does not at this point pause to ask whether the perceived complexity and emotional truth might be present precisely because the love story concerns two girls, she unhesitatingly places the film within the genre of the teen romance in spite of its 'rarity'. Her classification of *Show Me Love* is sound, both from American and Swedish perspective, as its central focus is unarguably an adolescent romance, even if lesbian. Indeed, Jeremy Heilman somewhat

disapprovingly states that *Show me Love* demonstrates 'precisely the kind of naiveté and sweetness that one would expect to find in any teen romance' (2004), while James Brundage exclaims that, 'pound for pound, *Show Me Love* is as good of a Hughesian romantic comedy that I have seen since *Can't Hardly Wait*' (2000). That critics and audience alike tend to dwell on ways the film diverges from the norm accentuates just how rare 'complexity and emotional truth' of this calibre is within the genre, rather than implying nonconformity to the genre as such.

A closer look at plot and central characters clarifies the positioning of *Show Me Love* as a norm and/or anomaly within the teen romance genre. The film opens on Agnes' (Rebecca Liljeberg) sixteenth birthday. Forced by her well-meaning but clueless mother to host a birthday party it looks like the only guest will be wheelchair-bound Viktoria (Josefin Nyberg) whom Agnes cruelly berates, claiming they 'are just pretend friends because there's no one else to be with'.² But then Elin (Alexandra Dahlström) shows up and, spurred on by a bet with her sister, Jessica (Erica Carlson), kisses Agnes on the lips. Jessica and Elin run off, leaving Agnes stunned and hurt, but Elin immediately regrets the prank and later returns to apologize just as Agnes is making a desperate albeit inefficient attempt at slitting her wrist. On a long walk the girls reveal their innermost desires and end up kissing passionately. But, rather than calling Agnes the next day as promised, Elin starts dating Johan (Mathias Rust). Thus a lesbian twist complicates the genre norm as the audience waits to see whether Johan or Agnes will be awarded the promised happily-ever-after ending with Elin.

Narratively, *Show Me Love* thus follows the formula of the teen romance quite comfortably. That critics continually dwell on *Show Me Love*'s uniqueness is due to its characterization, not its plotline. Armitage, for example, states:

Where in standard teen romances, the characters are rendered in shorthand (jocks and nerds are stock characters, as are the so-called 'outcasts' who are so clearly real-life prom queens and kings), *Show Me Love* gets beyond types. Instead, characters are allowed depth and frailty. (Armitage 1999)

This depth is extended to central and secondary characters alike, resulting in a remarkable group of complex and multidimensional individuals bound by their common experience of small-town mentality and restrictions. Agnes is shy, sensitive and unpretentious and, as is expected of the lead in a romantic comedy, deeply in love even if she happens to be in love with another girl. Although she has been living in Åmål for almost two years she has no friends. This may be due to her shyness or her sexual orientation, but neither is confirmed. At first glance Agnes fits the prevalent ugly-duckling lead of the American teen romance with her plain hairstyle and baggy trousers, but such a reading is undermined by the failure of her appearance to change during the course of the film; nor is it ever the subject of discussion.

The 14-year old Elin is Agnes' complete opposite: excessively feminine and focused on her looks, loud, popular and uninhibited. At first glance she may be read as the cheerleader-type lead of so many American teen romances. According to convention she would be expected to fall for the shy boy, a possibility invited by the character of sensitive and quiet Johan. Importantly, in spite of the film's central lesbian theme, Johan does not lose Elin because he is male (i.e. Elin's rejection of heteronormative conformity), but due to repeatedly failing to think and speak for himself and, in spite of all his infatuation, never acknowledging Elin as anything more than the 'pretty' girl. Conversely, *Show Me Love's* gender-twist invites a reading of Elin as a female version of the teen romance's popular boy who has the choice of every girl in the school but falls for the ugly duckling, *Pretty in Pink* (John Hughes, 1986) and *She's All That* (Robert Iscove, 1999) being good examples. After all, her sister exclaims that although Elin has not slept with anyone, she has 'necked about 70,000'. But Elin is a sensitive if bored girl who, in spite of Sweden's emphasis on equal rights, has no illusions about the future the small-town norm offers women.

Although her sister is equally aware of these small-town norms, Jessica seems eerily satisfied with her life. A self-assured version of the teen movie's party girl, she seeks fun through drinking, and validation through having a boyfriend, the chauvinistic Markus (Stefan Hörberg). Nonetheless, her character too develops through the film as she becomes increasingly critical of Markus and more aware of the

choices open to her.

Moodysson allows his characters both childish vindictiveness, like Elin's pouring chocolate milk over her sister in the opening scene, and shocking cruelty, such as when the tormented Agnes lashes out at Viktoria, saying she does not 'want to be friends with a palsied cripple who listens to the Backstreet Boys'. But, both Elin's frustration and the emotional anguish that causes Agnes' outburst are recognizable and easy for the audience to relate to. Although it is unclear whether Viktoria's indifference to Agnes' apology stems from anger and pain or implies that Agnes was correct in claiming they were only 'pretend friends', her subsequent fuelling of the (true) rumours of Agnes' lesbianism suggests one outsider berating another one in a hopeless attempt to get in with the popular crowd rather than a vicious revenge.

Refreshingly, the cast of *Show Me Love* is free of stereotypical nerds, dim-witted jocks and bullies. Markus may be a hot-headed jerk with a baffling obsession with mobile phones, but he is planning his future and getting decent grades. That he thinks himself the ultimate authority on what girls 'understand' is more a reflection of the small-town mentality and conservatism than his meanness or stupidity. Even the self-obsessed Camilla (Lisa Skagerstam) is simply tactless and insensitive rather than straightforwardly homophobic or cruel.

Moodysson's characters are thus in conversation with the teen romance at every level of *Show Me Love*, while simultaneously transcending the norm of the genre as their depth and complexity makes them true to life. Similarly to the constructed small-town setting discussed above, the characters' multidimensionality enables them to transcend boundaries of language and culture and allows American audience to identify with them as effortlessly as did the Swedish audience.

Not surprisingly, personal identification is common in American reviews of the film (as it was in Sweden), where the reviewers more often than not strive to ignore or eliminate the film's 'foreign' status and bring it 'home' (read: authenticate it). For example, Peter Stack remarks that: 'These kids are, like, real – so familiar they might as well be in San Carlos, Hayward or Novato' (1999). Additionally, reviews frequently reflect on the reviewers' personal experiences of their adolescence as

much as providing an objective reading of the film. Thus Roger Ebert's review of *Show Me Love* conjures up his positive memories of those years as he muses: 'This is all I ask of a movie about teenagers: That they be as smart, as confused, as good-hearted and as insecure as the kids I went to high school with' (2000). Other reviewers are more neutral but still focused on the recognisability of the characters, such as Charles Taylor ('the two heroines are so recognizable as real girls') or Jake Wilson ('just real kids who don't understand everything and are stumbling through things as best they can') (Taylor 1999; Wilson 2000). However, most reviewers refer to adolescence as a difficult or even torturous time. Examples include Jeff Vice, who states that 'this low-key charmer from Sweden so perfectly portrays what it's like to be a gawky, unpopular teenager – especially one who's longing for love and/or acceptance' (2000); Liese Spencer, who observes that 'these young people are not allowed to play at being adults, but are trapped in a real teen purgatory, waiting for childhood to end and life to begin' (2011); and, perhaps most honestly, according to kissingfingertips.com: 'The children in this film are cruel, merciless and extraordinarily naive, just like we all were at that age' (1998).

The strength of *Show Me Love* and, arguably, the source of its popularity, is Moodysson's ability to present the confusion, frustration and excitement of the teenage years in a way recognisable to most, regardless of nationality, class or sexual orientation. Similarly, the construct of Åmål provides the perfect backdrop, familiar in its restrictive hyper-normativity as we are reminded, subtly, what limited control teenagers have over their lives. Moodysson's choice of a lesbian adaptation of the teen romance genre for bringing all of these facets of the teenage experience together demands in itself a queer reading, as all normative practices are already questioned and doubted by the film's perspective.

The Importance of Queering

Through its multi-layered characters' confused and at times desperate pursuit of happiness, *Show Me Love* effortlessly appeals to more than one audience. Early in the film Agnes' father (Ralph Carlsson) attempts

to comfort his dejected daughter, using his own life as an example to prove to her things will get better. He describes his twenty-five year class reunion as a cathartic moment of shedding his former identity of the unpopular boy and embracing his new identity as a successful adult; a story many in the audience may relate to. Yet, although Agnes listens patiently, she finds little comfort in the story. 'But dad', she says with the time-confined logic of a teenager, 'you're talking like, in twenty-five years. Sorry, but I'd rather be happy now than in twenty-five years'. For the teenager, twenty-five years in the future, to quote Agnes, 'doesn't exist'; all that exists is the here and now complete with its raw emotion and confusion.³

In a film unflinchingly addressing teenage angst Agnes' reaction to her father's story provides a key moment. Agnes' anxiety is never downplayed, nor is it presented as any less agonizing or unreal due to her young age. The teenagers in the audience, gay and straight alike, may partake in her distress and share her sense of urgency, while the adults, regardless of their sexual orientation, may remember just how desperate one can feel at sixteen. Even so, acknowledging that Agnes is lesbian is crucial, not only for the countless LGBTQ⁴ teenagers frantically searching for cinematic representations, any representation, to identify with, but also in order to enable the transformative power of queering by inviting the audience to participate in and identify with the desperation of an LGBTQ teenager. Kevin N. Laforest states that, when watching *Show Me Love*, 'you can feel all the anguish that comes with discovering who you are, especially when you're different' (1999), that is, the audience may identify with the character and still experience something greater, undergo a queering of sorts. This, however, is the step so many commentators refuse to take.

In spite of this invitation on the part of *Show Me Love*, a majority of reviews ignore or reject the invitation of experiencing something more. The same multilayered recognisability that enables critics to identify with *Show Me Love*'s characters is frequently utilised to dismiss the lesbian theme, on the grounds of an argument that could be summed up as: 'I identify with these characters and since I am not lesbian/gay this is not a lesbian film'. Thus, Gunnar Rehlin (1998) exclaims that *Show Me Love* 'is not a "gay movie" per se, and the

lesbian angle is not over-stressed', although what 'over-stressing' the 'lesbian angle' might entail is left unsaid. Rehlin then continues to state that, 'lesbianism is a metaphor, in this case for doing something unusual – and ultimately liberating – in a conservative setting', thereby reducing the main characters' sexual orientation to an act or a game. Similarly, Marc Savlov describes the film as a 'spot-on dissection of a Swedish teenager's first love', but concludes that the 'fact that the teen in question – the lovely Alexandra Dahlstrom's shy misfit Agnes – is a lesbian is almost beside the point' (2000), while Peter Stack sees fit to tell us that *Show Me Love* 'has a lesbian theme, but it's handled with a refreshing sense of humanity' (1999); what that means is entirely unclear. In his review on UrbanCineFile.com, Richard Kuipers never mentions the characters' sexual orientation, in spite of stressing how the film is 'about confusion, cluelessness and the painful course of self discovery which budding sexual awareness inspires' (2000). Jeff Vice of the *Deseret News* even asks the audience to 'forget for a moment that "Show Me Love" has a gay-centric storyline' because 'those who can get over the fact that one character – two of them, in fact – may be gay will find it surprisingly poignant and unflinchingly honest' (2000). Why deliberately shunning the central theme is necessary to reveal the film's unflinching honesty Vice does not explain, any more than why one must 'get over' the characters' sexual orientation to realize its poignancy.

Even critics who acknowledge the film's lesbian component frequently downplay its significance, including James Berardinelli, who states:

Moodysson captures the uncertainty, anguish, heartbreak, and giddy highs that accompany a first love. And we don't just observe this happening; we feel it along with the characters. The fact that the romance is between two girls only intensifies the emotions, because both participants face the possibility of being ostracized. Yet *Show Me Love* is less about lesbianism than it is about self-discovery. The movie might have been less provocative with a traditional girl/boy romance, but it would have worked as effectively on an emotional level. (Berardinelli

1999)

Berardinelli not only elevates the subject of self-discovery at the cost of the harder-to-relate-to lesbian theme, but also effectively renders this self-discovery heteronormative by juxtaposing it with lesbianism rather than connecting the two. Thus read, *Show Me Love* no longer portrays young lesbians discovering themselves and their sexual orientation, but tells a story about adolescent girls' self-discovery where the possibility of lesbianism serves as added spice. Even more problematically, the all-too-real danger of banishment faced by anyone coming out in high school is only acknowledged by the critic in a romantic context where he labels it intensifying and provocative, i.e. exciting to the mainstream (read: heterosexual) audience.⁵ Finally, one must ask how the emotional turmoil accompanying the awakening of a sexual identity that is challenged and even condemned by heteronormative society could possibly have been conveyed as effectively in heterosexual terms. Berardinelli may claim to feel the characters' anguish and heartbreak, but in reality he actively rejects the lesbian component of *Show Me Love*.

To reiterate, *Show Me Love* invites us to fully identify with its multi-layered characters. We are invited to put ourselves in Agnes' shoes, to share her pain and desperation, to experience her loneliness and rejection and to accept it on her terms. We are invited to feel Elin's confusion, to realize the bewilderment and panic following that first kiss, and to partake in her numbing fear of coming out to the heteronormative community that has up until this moment dictated the terms of her life. Accepting this invitation allows us to experience a different view of the world and to ask, with genuine concern, what is needed for these girls to be happy now. An honest answer inevitably calls for the transformative power of queering, because the heteronormative 'now' must change if Agnes and Elin are ever to achieve their desired happiness, i.e. realize the required ending of the romantic comedy.

Fortunately for all the Agneses and Elins out there, there are critics who wholeheartedly accept *Show Me Love's* invitation to identify, commentators who embrace and celebrate the characters' sexual

orientation and who share in the film's queering of heteronormativity, such as Jeffrey M. Anderson who finds himself 'caught up in the romance and in the triumphant climax' (1999), Lavender Menace who praises Moodysson's 'representation of lesbianism as itself a source of hope and potential happiness, an end to anguish rather than a cause of it' (2009), and Beth Armitage, who makes no attempt to deny the main characters' lesbian identity. Similarly to Berardinelli, Armitage emphasizes the experience of a mainstream audience, but with one significant difference; stressing *Show Me Love's* invitation, she suggests the entire audience identify with the lesbian characters:

Show Me Love's impeccable acting and hand-held camerawork [...] paint an incredibly vivid picture of high school, to which most viewers can relate (even if you aren't Swedish, even if you aren't lesbian). What makes a story seem 'universal' is not that we share a same specific experience or identity, but that we all experience the emotions that a specific experience can evoke [...]

Show Me Love is one of those films that feels 'universal,' not because it represents lesbians as 'just like everybody else,' but because 'everybody else' can feel what these characters feel. It is just an added pleasure of *Show Me Love* that it may be straight folks who are finding representations of themselves in a 'lesbian love story,' rather than the other way around. (Armitage 1999)

In its fullest extent, *Show Me Love's* invitation to identification is an invitation to queering. To accept it means not only being open to finding a representation of oneself within a lesbian love story, but being open to (or even an advocate for) continual queering of one's own heteronormative environment. As the following analysis claims, real change does not have to be on a large scale. Even if all you may affect is your immediate surroundings, that little change is vitally important.

Queer Transformation

Agnes may be lonely and unhappy almost to the very end of *Show Me Love*, but she is secure in her identity. That she neither denies nor declares her lesbianism stems more from a lack of an incentive to come out than insecurity or fear of doing so. Agnes knows whom she loves ('Elin!!!!!!!!!!!!'), and she knows what she wants (to not have to have a party and for Elin to notice her) although she has no illusions of getting her wishes fulfilled.

Conversely, Elin has no idea what, let alone whom, she wants at the beginning of *Show Me Love*. Even though she loudly claims she wants to go to a rave, to do drugs, to mug a pensioner, to become Miss Sweden, her only rebellious act is to inadvertently take the lift without her skirt on, a transgression that gets her grounded by her mother. Her ensuing choice of going to Agnes' party rather than to the one her high school clique is attending is a desperate if empty attempt at defying the conventions of her stifling heteronormative community, the only available option resembling anything unconventional. 'I'd even rather go to Agnes' [place]' she wails; 'maybe she knows someone really nice. People from somewhere else'.

Agnes personifies a queer alternative for Elin in the sense of queering as an in-your-face attitude and a deliberate defiance of heteronormativity, not because of what Agnes is (a lesbian), but for what she is not (part of Åmål's in-crowd).⁶ Indeed, at this point Elin is equally unaware of Agnes' alleged lesbianism as she is of her own sexual orientation. However, a desire for queering is expressed and a source identified, even if the teen romance limits it to the characters' community and confined spaces. Mark Graham reminds us that:

Geographical displacement is not in itself necessary to achieve a feeling of estrangement, what is required is 'discursive strangeness'. Strangers are usually understood in terms of the place they arrive at, while exiles are defined in terms of the place they left behind. But queers in a heteronormative society never quite arrive like strangers, but neither are they exiles because they have not left home. (Graham 1998: 118)

In the case of Elin and Agnes the association between the familiar and the strange is even more complicated. Agnes is indeed a stranger, but she should not be; her queerness prevents her from finding home in the heteronormative construct in spite of having lived in Åmål for almost two years. Conversely, no one seems more at home in Åmål than Elin, but her own budding queerness has rendered the familiar strange in a stifling, not liberating way. Fearing the option of becoming a stranger by staying, she flirts with the alternative of leaving the construct to become an exile. However, as teenagers the girls' mobility is restricted to the space allotted to them by adult society, i.e. Åmål. All that they have power to shape and queer are their immediate surroundings and community, effectively expressed by the film's constricting, even claustrophobic camerawork (Anderson 1999; Miller 2000).

For Agnes this queering mostly means painful and prolonged waiting, while every part of her lonely, tormented existence cries for happiness to start 'now'. For Elin, queering is marked by a series of outings (physically expressing the act of coming out), the first one accidental as mentioned above, when the lift opens on her in her underwear. The second is restricted or controlled (Jessica's locking Elin in and Agnes out of Agnes' bedroom), and the third is liberating (exiting the high school toilet with Agnes as her girlfriend). These outings are juxtaposed with series of declarations or attempts at verbal wish-fulfilment for life as she would like it to be. As the following analysis shows, each expression, verbal and physical, marks a step in Elin's development as we, along with Agnes, wait for her to develop into the queer catalyst she has the makings of. Then, and only then, will the two girls be able to queer their environment in however limited a capacity is available to them.

The required obstacles of the romantic comedy materialize in the form of heteronormative options and advocates, the love-struck, moped-riding boyfriend, the eyebrow-raising female friend who 'knows' you are 'not like that' and, most importantly, the ever-present older sister, Jessica. Ironically, Jessica plays a dual role. As the unquestioning agent of (heterosexual) conventionality she promotes the status quo and criticizes her sister's quest for an alternative as 'exasperating', asking why she must 'always do the opposite?' But Jessica's preferences also

provide Elin with norms to rebel against, and her criticisms give Elin ideas to embrace. Pointedly, at Agnes' place, Jessica locks the room without telling Elin. Agnes, the perceived queer threat, is thus locked out while Elin is locked in, literally closeted.

But queering has its way. When Jessica snidely shares the school gossip of Agnes' alleged lesbianism, Elin exclaims she thinks it is 'cool' and, in much the same flippant manner as her earlier avowal to become Miss Sweden, adds that she is 'going to become one too'. This is prior to the dared kiss and Björklund argues that 'lesbianism is unacceptable or unthinkable' to Elin at this point. I would suggest, rather, that it is unimaginable; an alternative hitherto inconceivable to Elin (Björklund 2009: 42). That it is introduced by Jessica, the guardian of heteronormativity, is a sweet irony, and the scene ends with Elin's second outing, rushing down the stairs from Agnes' room after the bet-inspired kiss. It is important to note that only Jessica is laughing, that Elin throws the 20 crown winnings from Jessica on the ground, and that she immediately wants to return to apologise even if she allows herself to be dissuaded by Jessica.

With the kiss, queering has irreversibly been introduced and everything now becomes thinkable to Elin. Heteronormative space has been disrupted and new queer bonds cut 'across identitarian positionings that will remain forever incommensurated' (Weiner & Young 2011: 227). This is exemplified when later that night Elin hesitatingly voices the possibility of studying psychology when discussing future plans with Agnes. Agnes' immediate and unquestioning support of Elin's ambitions stands in stark contrast to the superficial banter between the two sisters earlier. Thrilled by the possibilities of new futures, but clearly dreading the prospect of creating 'a viable queer identity' within Åmål, Elin suggests they hitchhike to Stockholm. The big city offers the 'anonymity and the "critical mass" necessary for some kind of community or infrastructure to develop', i.e. an easier alternative to having to queer her own community of Åmål (Graham 1998: 118). But this option is not available to teenagers bound by the rules of adult society, not even in a romantic comedy. That night on the bridge, Elin realizes the possibility of an alternative future for herself, thanks to Agnes, thanks to queering, but she also realizes that she will

have to create that future herself and the first step in that direction is staying and becoming a stranger, not leaving to become an exile.

I assert that from the moment of her second outing, Elin is effectively reinventing herself in line with the teen romance trope of self-actualisation. That this is a form of queering is supported by her intertwining discourses of sexual orientation, educational pursuits and professional goals; success at one is contingent upon manifestation of another. Her first attempt at verbal wish-fulfilment is made on the bridge with Agnes as she voices the idea of pursuing psychology. It is too soon for her to verbally acknowledge her own sexual orientation even though she enthusiastically expresses support for Agnes'.

Elin makes her second and more daring attempt at verbal wish-fulfilment the following night when, sitting in front of the television with her mother, she suddenly declares: 'Mom? I am a lesbian.' Taken by surprise, her mother exclaims: 'What?' and Elin clarifies: 'Homosexual'. A short silence later she adds: 'No, I was just kidding'. Björklund argues this is 'a way for Elin to figure out how her mother would react to her actually being a lesbian,' and reads her immediate withdrawal of the statement as Elin being unhappy with her mother's reaction (2009: 43). Conversely, I argue that Elin withdraws her statement too quickly for it to be read as a reaction. Rather we witness Elin contemplating a possibility – an identity – and taking a step to realizing it by saying it out loud. She has done this with numerous other identities already: Miss Sweden, model, and, so far most seriously, the identity of a psychologist on the bridge the night before. However, at home with her mother her statement is uttered quite matter-of-factly and in the present tense, 'I am a lesbian,' and when she adds: 'Homosexual' she does so categorically and without defiance or attempted humour. In fact, it is only when she retracts her statement claiming to have been kidding that Elin sounds unconvincing or insincere.

Elin makes her third and most forceful announcement a few days later while hanging out with her now boyfriend, Johan. The setting of an empty playground is a subtle reminder of heteronormative values, emphasized by the company of Jessica and Marcus. In the film's most explicit reference to Elin's class status, we learn that the boys are attending vocational college (studying Mechanics and Electrics) and

that Jessica is contemplating courses in either Childhood and Leisure or Hairstyling. Revealingly, Johan neglects to ask what plans Elin might have for her future. Elin, however, does not wait for his question, but exuberantly declares: 'I'm going to become a psychologist!' then adds, somewhat hesitantly, 'I think so, anyway'. We cut to Jessica who asks, rather incredulously: 'Psychologist?!' Ignoring her, Elin wonders to herself which program she should take, and Jessica repeats: 'You are going to be a psychologist?!'

Contrary to the scene with Agnes on the bridge, the present company offers Elin no support. Rather, her statement is met with incredulity exceeding her mother's when Elin tried on the lesbian identity earlier. But this time she stands her ground and defiantly answers: 'Yes.' She may not yet dare to acknowledge her sexual orientation, but she is ready to break from the career norms of gender and class. Even so, the two identities of a lesbian and a psychologist intertwine for Elin, both being new possibilities that Agnes has enabled her to envisage.

Elin's choice between Agnes and Johan is a choice between a socially sanctioned relationship with indecisive and unsupportive boyfriend culminating in her nightmare of screaming kids and a husband whom she expects will in due course leave her for someone younger, and a queer relationship with a self-assured and supportive girlfriend complete with a successful career in psychology. It is difficult not to see the queer relationship like a clear winner. Although Björklund claims that *Åmål* 'rewards a different kind of femininity', i.e. conventional heterosexual femininity, how that 'reward' manifests is something of a mystery (Björklund 2009: 46). When scrutinized, *Show Me Love* never presents the heterosexual norm as an appealing alternative. Elin is brought up by an over-worked and exhausted mother who evades discussing the absent father. Agnes' parents, while loving and caring individuals, are never shown effectively functioning as a couple. Even Jessica, in all her support of heteronormativity, cannot explain why she is dating Markus, but claims, somewhat defiantly: 'It's just like that. It's him and me. It's just like that.' Having no better argument she presents a photo of Markus as a grubby-faced child, foreshadowing her expected and accepted future role as a wife and a mother.

Agnes functions as the catalyst of change, the one who makes

everything possible, whether that is Elin's new-found belief in own abilities to become a psychologist, or her yet-to-be-declared queerness. Björklund states that 'through accepting her love for Agnes [Elin] is able to step out of small-town womanhood and claim her subjectivity' (Björklund 2009: 46). I would argue that this is only partially correct, because in spite of everything Elin remains directly dependent on Agnes' support and strength to reinvent her identity. Indeed it is the prospect of Agnes' love and acceptance that brings new meaning to Elin's existence and enables her to envisage new possibilities for herself; a rewarding career in psychology and a love-filled, supportive same-sex relationship.⁷ Yet, it is telling that Elin is only able to confess her own feelings contingent upon Agnes' corroboration of the same: 'Is it true that you...? Viktoria said that you were...in love with me. Because...if you are, then I am too. In you, that is.' Although her declaration of love may be 'characteristically conditional', to quote Stenport, one should not forget that in spite of her more secure self-image, Agnes has not cared to come out on her own either. It is a scary world out there for a lone teenager (Stenport 2012: 68).

Agnes' wait is finally over as she enables Elin's third and official outing. Triumphantly the girls exit the high school toilet to face the crowd they will have to face for oh-so-many days to come. Whether these final scenes are 'simply the calm before the storm' as suggested on kissingfingertips.com (1998), all that was familiar has been rendered strange – albeit now in an exciting way. In 'Follow the Yellow Brick Road', Graham muses that:

Dorothy's travels (brought on by a sudden blow to the head) take her 'nowhere' at all, and yet this going nowhere renders the utterly familiar strange. Dorothy learns that there is no place like home, but this is true in a queer sense because Dorothy has seen that not even home is itself. A queer anthropology can also help to achieve the same result on our own home turf (the blow to the head is optional). No place is, then, ever entirely what it seems. (Graham 1998: 105)

Graham reminds us that this is not necessarily a liberating

experience: 'What is present is continually haunted by what is absent' he claims, because 'places are made as much by exclusions as by inclusions' (Graham 1998: 105). This is no doubt true for *Åmål* as well as any other place. However, the genre of the teen romance allows us to suspend this bleak view, if briefly, and join Agnes and Elin in celebrating the queering of *Åmål*, however limited, with a nice, large glass of chocolate milk. That is, if we acknowledge that this is a film about two lesbians coming out. If, however, all we see is a film about small-town boredom, then there is nothing to celebrate at the end, because *Åmål* is no more or less boring than it was at the film's opening.

Notes

¹ Although *Show Me Love* is analysed here as the romantic teen comedy it certainly is, the socio-political discourse it encountered in the United States upon its release was anything but light-hearted. On one hand, the newly-founded Trevor Project (<http://www.thetrevorproject.org/HistoryOfTrevor>) had created awareness of bullying of and suicides among LGBTQ youth leading to the establishment of the Trevor Lifeline in August 1998. On the other, Matthew Shepard's brutal murder in October 1998 re-kindled demands for classifying violence against LGBTQ people as a hate crime, finally resulting in the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act to be signed into law eleven years later, expanding the 1969 United States federal hate-crime law to include crimes motivated by a victim's actual or perceived gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability.

² Because the vast majority of *Show Me Love*'s audience discussed here is dependent on the film's subtitles and the online communities in question rely on English as the common language, all quotes will be in English, using the subtitles from the U.S. DVD release.

³ This teenage urgency and emotional focus on the 'now' is at the core of The Trevor Project, as well as the more recent It Gets Better Project, where the lack of openly gay adults and mentors in the lives of LGBTQ youth factors strongly in their inability to imagine a positive future for themselves and, thereby, increasing the already high suicide risk among those children (<http://www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/about-it-gets-better-project/>). In this context, queering the *Åmåls* of this world is not just a liberating gesture, it is a life necessity.

⁴ LGBTQ is an acronym standing for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. It is an inclusive term, emphasizing a diversity of sexuality and gender identity-based cultures and, as such, sometimes used to refer to anyone who is non-heterosexual or non-cisgender.

⁵ See the discourse described in note 3 around LGBTQ youth suicide prevention as well as bullying and other violence against LGBTQ members of population in general.

⁶ It is worth noting that in Sweden 'queer' as a term has developed a somewhat more complex meaning than within American context. See Rosenberg 2008: 16.

⁷ Although adult members of the audience are likely to be sceptical of teenagers' vision for the future, it is important to acknowledge Moodysson's respect for the teenage urgency of the 'here and now'. Even if everything will be different a few days from now, nothing is more true or more real at this moment in their lives.

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