

Love's Coming (Out)

Sexualising the Space of Desire

- [Kerry Mallan](#) and [John Stephens](#)
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¹ In *The Threshold of the Visible World*, Kaja Silverman advances a subtle, ethical, post-Lacanian account of what constitutes "the active gift of love" and how this might be expressed on the screen. She argues for an orientation of subject to love object which is not merely an alternative to romantic passion, but an account of how identification of the loving subject and love object "might function in a way that results in neither the triumph of self-sameness, nor craven submission to an exteriorised but essentialized ideal". In a move particularly relevant to our focus in this paper, she goes on to suggest that a gift of love so constituted entails an escape from conformity with culturally dictated ideals and thence a capacity "to put ourselves in a positive identificatory relation to bodies which we have been taught to abhor and repudiate" (79). Two lesbian/gay teen films of the late 1990s – Lukas Moodysson's *Fucking Åmål* (1998; also known as *Show Me Love*) and Simon Shore's *Get Real* (1999) – offer an illuminating contrast in the ways they deal with the possibility of the gift of love in the conflictual contexts both of teenage gay and lesbian love and sexuality, and of small-town spaces.

² Space solicits desire, but the sexual frisson that is evoked through encounters in various spaces in film depicted as offering excitement, risk, and bodily pleasures seems limited in three ways. First, the progression from desire to love is severely circumscribed by cultural presuppositions about the physical and social attributes of appropriate love objects. This is particularly evident in the Hollywood teen film, with its recurrent male and female Cinderella roles. Second, the desire represented is predominantly heterosexual, so the appropriate love object is further specified by the assumption of heteronormativity. Finally, there is a persistent attribution of space to woman and time to man – as early as the late eighteenth century William Blake had written, "Space is a woman" (in Bal 169) – and although this has been questioned by feminist thinkers (see Irigaray 1987) it still pervades filmic imagery. As Sue Best notes, the bounded spaces that people inhabit – "the nation, regions, cities and the home" – often rely on feminine metaphors to describe their attributes, contours, architecture; in the case of the romantic 'home', its enclosures suggest a warm, uterine space and maternal care. In a related sense, the open spaces of the countryside, the city streets and solitary travel have connoted a masculine space and prerogative (182-3). Traditionally, man moves through these spaces with a sense of temporal purpose, while woman bides her time in bounded domestic space.

³ In *Fucking Åmål*, the film's preoccupation with enclosed spaces, and especially the domestic spaces of home and school, on one hand generates an intense mood of claustrophobia while, on the other, communicates the terrifying aloneness of the young person abjected by the "in"-crowd. A measure of the inanity of the teenage boys of this small Swedish community is the unexamined misogyny of their spatial thinking, as when, for example, Jessica's boyfriend Markus asserts that boys are interested in and understand technology, like cell phones, and that girls are instead good at things like "make-up and looking good". *Get Real* expresses the contrast more as that of outside and inside: the male domain of the sports field set against the interior space of the room where girls and boys like Steven ("I don't smoke or play football and have an IQ over 25") produce the school magazine. While these binaristic notions of gender and space serve as useful means for considering the restrictive nature of masculine and feminine constructions which still exist in various contemporary societies, they are also limited and limiting when it comes to thinking beyond a heterosexual framework.

⁴ The imbrication of space and woman could account for the ongoing censure, disruption, and violation of feminised movement in so-called masculinised spaces. The notion of transgressing across spaces is the underlying theme of both *Get Real* and *Fucking Åmål*. Both films, with their "coming out" narratives, move away from conventional cinematic representations of teen love. Moreover, they provide a cinematic space in which the female or male body is a source of same-sex pleasure and desire, and offer viewers a space not defined by the other gender or by a narrative progress towards heterosexual romance and fulfilment. Consequently, the characters' sensual/sexual encounters privilege bodily pleasure, response, and the ability to go beyond "the blind spot" of patriarchal sexuality (Irigaray 1985). Where they differ is that *Fucking Åmål* depicts Elin (the "love object") progressing so far in her love for Agnes that her triumphant coming out is simultaneously an affirmation of a body universally abhorred and repudiated within the dominant youth community. There is no suggestion, for example, that Agnes will need to abandon her loose, oversized clothes and her trousers in favour of Elin's short skirts and low-cut tops (although there is a hint that Elin may find Agnes's intellectual interests more engrossing than the belated and etiolated versions of

popular culture she has up until now inhabited). In contrast to *Fucking Åmål*, *Get Real* depicts the ultimate failure of John Dixon (the love object) to acknowledge love for Steven Carter, abhorred and repudiated by male peers for his suspected (and actual) homosexuality.

- 5 Space is a shifting signifier which points to, but does not anchor, meaning across social, cultural, and territorial dimensions. In a Foucauldian sense, space is often linked to concepts of power. Furthermore, space, particularly queer space, becomes both a visual and metaphorical entity which needs to be interrogated in terms of its relationship to, and representation through, the eye of the beholder. In *Get Real* and *Fucking Åmål* "looking" becomes a complex play between characters and viewers. The specular logic that operates within the conventional notions of the gaze, with its underlying structure of a dominant subject and submissive object, is thus both interrogated and undercut (Mulvey).
- 6 In *Get Real* a hole in a public toilet wall provides a spatial site for spying on illicit gay sexual encounters as well as a means for checking out a potential sexual partner. Such voyeurism is perverse as it disrupts the visual pleasure which has become intimately tied to patriarchal ideology with its structures of looking (male) and being looked at (female). This is one instance (and there are others in both films) when looking occupies a queer space, demonstrating complicity with voyeurism, desire, and visual pleasure, and disrupting the association of the gaze with rigid gender roles. The act of looking that the characters undertake also helps to make the viewer aware of the particular quality of their own gaze. The films contrive to position the viewer in ways that focus attention on the specific nature of his/her gaze as we become witness/voyeur to the characters' spatial trajectories across private and public spaces - bedroom, toilet, home, school.
- 7 Early in *Fucking Åmål* the gaze is invited and dismantled when Elin goes half undressed to try on clothes in front of the mirror in the apartment block's lift, only to find that her sister Jessica has forgotten to bring the clothes. By overtly and comically replacing the narcissistic gaze with the gaze of the camera (and hence audience) the film problematizes looking, and begins to establish the situation whereby to look at Elin is to share the looking with Agnes, effectively queering the look. Further deconstructions of the look, or gaze, occur in the contrasting femme/butch representations of Elin and Agnes. The erotic pleasure of looking (at Elin) provides a counterpoint of gazes and highlights the vicissitudes of desire. While Elin's sexy body and conventional beauty conform to an image of female desirability and make her the object of male fantasy, she is also the love object of Agnes. However, Elin's feisty, restless character refuses any image of passive femininity. Rather, she embodies an active, desiring female subjectivity. Thus, the space of both female and male spectatorship is open to erotic imaginings. By contrast, the film undoes the tradition of fetishisation associated with the male gaze through the character of Agnes: she wears no makeup, hides her body in oversized clothing, and her hair is unadorned and simply styled. Thus, the camera's attention to Agnes's silent watching of Elin undermines the male gaze, creating a female gaze and a space of female desire.
- 8 A comparable effect is achieved in *Get Real* when Steven uses his membership of the school magazine committee to suggest that a queer community exists within the school. First, and more subtly, the photographs he takes of John Dixon as school sporting hero queer the act of looking: Steven's father, a professional photographer, sees them as examples of photographic art; John's father views them as a celebration of a finely tuned athletic body; girls look at them heterosexually; but from Steven's perspective they are gay pin-ups. The ground of a love relationship, as Silverman argues, is to posit the other rather than the self as the cause of desire, and hence to perceive perfection in the features of another and to celebrate that perceived perfection. This is the work performed by Steven's photographs of John, and the irony inherent in the fact that the significance of the photographs depends on the interpretation of the beholder exemplifies how irony operates in these films to change how people interpret the "cultural screen", the mental picture of society which they have naturalised. In *Fucking Åmål*, a class photograph of Elin in a school magazine also serves to queer the act of looking as it represents the love object of both Johan and Agnes. Whereas Johan cuts out Elin's image, effectively excising her from the others in the photograph, and stores it in his wallet, Agnes is content to contemplate the image in the privacy of her bedroom, leaving it intact. Elin's image has a strong erotic and visual impact on both Johan and Agnes, connoting "a to-be-looked-at-ness", and the actions by Johan and Agnes to look and to possess can be understood in psychoanalytic terms as their attempt to turn the represented image into a fetish object (Mulvey). In a related way to Steven's photograph of John Dixon as a gay pin-up, Agnes is able to reinvest erotically in the body of another woman.
- 9 Steven's second intervention by means of the magazine is to write the "Get Real" article about youth homosexuality. Once this is banned by the school Principal, it functions as a space of absence which defines and publicises the lack at the heart of the community. Further, in so far as it is lack which makes desire possible, Steven's manifesto on a more individual level legitimises that lack for homosexual subjects. *Get Real* quite explicitly seeks to overturn the heterosexist stereotype of gays as lonely and unhappy figures, and to offer a different perspective on gay subjectivity and sexuality.
- 10 *Fucking Åmål* performs the same work for the subjectivity and sexuality of young lesbians, as

Agnes works through the trauma of her initial rejection by Elin and her “outing” at home, and Elin works through the identity crisis prompted by her emerging desire for Agnes. For each, the journey from abjection to joy ends triumphantly as, with no apparent threat of retribution, they redefine the significance of key spaces, of school and home. Both films use space to articulate the characters’ joys and anguish as they struggle with the conflicting effects of love and desire for another, the taunts they suffer from others because of their sexuality, and the eventual amelioration of the restrictions of their spatial location.

¹¹ While the gaze offers a metaphorical space for looking in *Get Real* and *Fucking Åmål*, space is also defined in regional and sexual terms. Elin and Agnes are space-bound characters, living within the claustrophobic confines of small town Åmål (Sweden). The original title of the film (*Fucking Åmål*), rather than the more bland, international release title (*Show Me Love*), captures teenage boredom with the stifling confines of their environment. Elin’s howls of exasperation give voice to her feelings of entrapment: “Why do we have to live in fucking Åmål? When something’s ‘in’ in the rest of the world, it’s already ‘out’ by the time it gets here.” When Elin and Agnes attempt an escape by hitching a ride out of town, their make-out session in the backseat of their lift’s car is accompanied by Foreigner’s “I want to know what love is”; the interplay of song lyrics, the young lovers’ sexual play, and their eventual eviction from the car offering an ironic performance that rehearses the double meaning of the film’s title and the story’s vexed themes of subjection and subjectivity. The visual style of *Fucking Åmål* also adds to the pervading sense of containment that the young protagonists experience. Interior domestic scenes dominate and appear spatially constrained. Often a low-key colour scheme serves as an iconic sign indicating the metaphorical nature of the drabness of Åmål.

¹² Agnes, as a relative newcomer to Åmål, occupies the spatial fringe both in terms of her strangeness to the place and her perceived queerness. She is the subject of ridicule, innuendo, and ostracism by her peers. Agnes’s marginalisation and abjection are metaphorically expressed through camera framing and tracking – close-ups capture her feelings of rejection and aloneness, and her movements in public spaces, such as the school canteen and corridors, are often confined to the perimeters or the background. By contrast, Elin appears to be in the spatial centre as she is a popular and sexually desirable young woman. It is when she falls in love with Agnes that she too finds herself dislocated, both within her self and within her home town. The stifling confines of Åmål offer limited recreational spaces for its youth, with the urban shopping centre and park are places for congregation and social contact. Ironically, communal spaces, such as the school and the park, effect a spatial intimacy through proximity; yet, the heterosexual imperative that operates in these public and populated spaces compels Elin and Agnes to effect a spatial distance with its necessary emotional and physical separation. When Elin and Agnes finally ‘come out’, it is part of a broader teen rebellion against continuing ennui and oppressive strictures that limit their lives.

¹³ Steven (*Get Real*) lives a privileged middle class life in Basingstoke (Hampshire, UK) although this is unsettled by a pervasive sense of homophobic surveillance, locally and immediately embodied in the school’s masculinist bullies, but networked more widely through fathers, school principals, and the police. As Foucault argued, surveillance has a disciplinary function because individuals are made conscious that they are being watched and judged from a normalising perspective. This being so, even open spaces in *Get Real* have a claustrophobic effect. The park where Steven goes in quest of sexual contact thus signifies ambiguously: messages are passed from within the smallest space (a cubicle within the toilet) but once outside an individual’s presence can be registered by any neighbour, and the concealed spaces of the woodland are subjected to police raids. The film neatly ties this physical surveillance to mental surveillance when Steven’s father confronts him about being seen in the park when he was supposed to have been working on his essay project about youth in the contemporary world. For Steven, the project is a sham because he is only enabled to write from within the normalised perspective which excludes himself. Communication at the highest level available to him – a prize-winning essay in a public competition – thus denies him any subjective agency. The film’s ironic chain thus entails first the winning of the prize (but only because his father secretly submitted Steven’s discarded essay) and then Steven’s subsequent use of the award ceremony to present his other, suppressed essay and to declare his sexual orientation.

¹⁴ In both films, gay and lesbian sexualities are constructed as paradoxical spaces. On the one hand, gay and lesbian desires and identities are distanced from the heterosexual paradigm, yet firmly embedded within it and (therefore subject to) homophobic discourses. Difference is not tolerated. In *Fucking Åmål*, characters are marginalised because of physical and sexual difference; in *Get Real*, difference is defined in terms of class, sexuality, and hegemonic masculinity. Both films offer positive outcomes which affirm a resignification of the “cultural screen”. By depicting the dystopic effect of heteronormative society on the principal gay and lesbian characters, each film functions to highlight issues of access to and place within the spatial public sphere. From *Fucking Åmål*, indeed, we might infer that such strategies as the ironic transformation of the gaze have the potential to produce utopian visions. Despite the strategy of allowing Steven one further transformation of public space, when he seizes a public forum to deliver his coming-out speech, *Get Real* offers a less utopian vision, but still a firm sense that social space has undergone significant disruption. While Elin comes to accept and realise the value of Agnes’s original “gift of love” to her, John Dixon is unable to move beyond the restrictive confines of heteronormative space and therefore

rejects Steven's public and personal gift of love. Nevertheless, in both films, it is through the agential actions of Elin, Agnes, and Steven in publicly declaring their love for the other that serves as an active signifier, openly challenging the sexualised space of their school and community: a space that passively accepts the kind of orthodoxy that naturalises heterosexualised ways of looking and loving, and abhors and repudiates homosexual/lesbian desire. In this sense, there is an opening up of a queer space of desire which exerts its own form of resistance and defiance to patriarchal discourse.

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