

# What It's All About

## A Tribute to *Fucking Åmål*

By David Christian  
(Berlin, Germany)  
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### 1. Falling in Love ... or Something

Let's begin with a short reminder of the facts.

In October 1998, a film that literally came out of nowhere exploded onto Swedish cinema screens. Performed by a mainly amateur cast, written and directed by a 29-year-old who had more or less just graduated from film school, and starring two girls, aged 14 and 17 respectively, who had never played leading roles in a feature film before, it had been shot somewhere in the Swedish province on a ridiculously low budget. Given that, nobody quite had an explanation for what followed. The film conquered the country within weeks. The critics hailed it as the best Swedish film ever, Bergman himself called it a masterpiece. The people flocked to the cinemas in crowds to see it. *Fucking Åmål*, the little shoestring film, turned into the biggest box office hit in the history of Swedish cinema. In the end, one million Swedes (of 9 million altogether) had seen it. The nation was in the grip of a collective *Fucking Åmål* euphoria (a »mass psychosis«, as director Lukas Moodysson later said) that seemed impossible to avoid even for the very few who wished not to be part of it. The leading actresses, Alexandra Dahlström and Rebecka Liljeberg, were admired as »the sweetest couple in Swedish film history« and acquired instant teen celebrity status overnight. In early 1999, the film swept over the prestigious Guldbagge Swedish National Film Awards ceremony, winning »Best Film«, »Best Script«, »Best Director« and »Best Female Leading Actresses«. About the same time, the rest of Scandinavia was infected with the *Fucking Åmål* craze and a triumphant procession through some of the major film festivals in the world followed. The film collected awards at, among others, the Berlin International Film Festival, the Norwegian Amanda Awards, the Flanders International Film Festival

(Ghent, Belgium), the Atlantic Film Festival (Halifax, Canada), the International Film Festivals in Rotterdam, Karlovy Vary (Czech Republic), and London, and it was nominated for many more.

Now this story, remarkable as it might be, is certainly not unique. Every now and then, low-budget productions will win critical acclaim and popularity at once and so turn into box office hits. But what definitely *is* unique about *Fucking Åmål* is the kind of response that the film received by audiences around the globe. This response surpassed the appreciative or sympathetic attitudes that people are usually prepared to extend to films, even to their favourite films. For in the case of *Fucking Åmål*, people seemed to completely *fall in love* with it, and I choose this word with care. In order to see that this is more than word-play, you only have to flip through some of the hundreds of comments that *Fucking Åmål* has attracted on the largest film site on the internet, the Internet Movie Database (*imdb.com*). Some of these deal in exuberating superlatives *à la* »the greatest film ever made«, but the meaninglessness of such compliments apart,<sup>1</sup> most of the comments are deeply moving. They show how honestly people from all over the world have struggled to find words for what Moodysson's film means to them. »I will remember this film till the day I die«, writes someone, while another says, »this film spoke to me and affected me in a way no other film has. It made me look at my life differently and changed it for the better«, and still another states that »words would never do justice to the magic of this gem. (...) It's a movie unlike any other I've ever seen.« And these are random examples, I could quote others by the dozen. Consider the following description by a reviewer from Stockholm, writing in April 2000:

»The most amazing thing happened when I was watching this movie in a theatre in down-town Stockholm a monday at 5.15 pm: The audience, in their mid-thirties (majority), gave the film standing ovations when it ended and the cast was displayed to Robyn's *Show Me Love*. I have never experienced anything like it before or after.«

You can tell from many other reviews that this kind of loving response is by no means an exception. The website *alexandra-dahlstrom.com* features a short video clip, shot in a Swedish cinema, which bears witness to the intensity of emotions inspired in a Swedish audience during a screening of *Fucking Åmål*. The penultimate scene, when the two lovers actually step out and stand by their love, is greeted with an incredible outburst of cheers, laughter, and wild applause. Rebecka Liljeberg herself once described in an interview how she came onstage after the film's premiere in October 1998 and was blown away by an audience standing on their seats, crying and screaming with joy. She also admitted (and so did other members of the film's cast and crew) that she had never expected that the film could possibly mean so much to other people. But even today, nearly seven years later, and although the heighdays of its success are long gone, *Fucking Åmål* still attracts new admirers and lovers any time it is shown anywhere in cinemas or on television.

What I would like to do is ask a rather simple question: *Why?* Why do people fall in love with this film? What is so special about it? In what follows, I will try to develop an

<sup>1</sup> I say »meaningless« because to take this assessment seriously would mean comparing *Fucking Åmål* to the landmarks of cinema history – films like *The Big Sleep*, *Ladri di biciclette*, *Citizen Kane*, *Jules et Jim*, *Tystnaden*, *A bout de souffle*, *2001*, *La dolce vita* or *Taxi Driver*, to name but a random selection of all-time classics. And that cannot be sensibly done because (as a German proverb says) you cannot compare apples to pears. If one uses labels like »best of all time«, one pretends to have an answer to the question whether *Fucking Åmål* is »better« than, say, *Apocalypse Now*. And my point is precisely *not* that *Apocalypse Now* is »better« than *Fucking Åmål*, but rather that no assessment at all can be made here, because on closer inspection one doesn't even understand what »better«, »worse« or »same« would mean in this case. The point is not, to quote another all-time great, that these films *ain't in the same league*, the point is rather that *they ain't even in the same sport*.

answer to this question. It is *my* answer, not a general theory, which means that I can only speak for myself. You won't find any psychological or sociological explanations for the appeal of *Fucking Åmål* here, and no use will be made of the theoretical apparatus of theatre and film studies. This text is just a personal reflection on a work of art that means a lot to me. But on the other hand, it is not just meant as a confession of private obsessions (as such, it would be of no interest to anybody) but as an attempt to *explain my love* in a way that hopefully makes it transparent and intelligible for others.

I should point out from the start that, in my opinion, the greatness of *Fucking Åmål* lies in the *story* it tells – in *what it's all about* – and in the way that story is told. That means that I will focus on the story and will have almost nothing to say on the specifically *cine-matographic* qualities of the film, like the unusual camera work, the editing, and so on.<sup>2</sup> I further announce that what made *me* fall in love with the film is the *main element* of the story, the relationship between its two leading characters. And that in consequence means that I will focus exclusively on this relationship and will not go into lots of other ingredients of the script that certainly add to its brilliance and would well be worth a closer look – for example, the many finely crafted supporting characters like Jessica, Olof, and Johan. And finally: My only »method« of analysis will be easy, even trivial. I will re-tell what I think are the decisive parts of the story and then analyze and comment upon them, in order to try to explain what I think makes *Fucking Åmål* such a miracle.<sup>3</sup>

In one of the comments praising *Fucking Åmål* on *imdb.com*, Julian Luna from Paris writes: »I feel very frustrated whenever I try to explain my love for the movie, for it looks like no words can ever convey my feelings.« Surely this is a widely shared feeling quite generally. With this text, I have tried to overcome that feeling. Thus at heart it is just a declaration of love masquerading as an exegetical essay (which unfortunately happens to be the only medium I have command of). Whether it is of any worth for anybody but myself is up to you to decide.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Agnes and Elin, a Short Introduction

The sound of a computer keyboard clicking. The face of a girl, earnest and concentrated. Words that appear on a display:

»My secret wish list:

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<sup>2</sup> I feel justified in this textual approach by Lukas Moodysson himself, who once said that he considered his *script* for *Fucking Åmål* to account for about »eighty percent« of his overall achievement in making the film, as compared to his direction (*Berlinale* Press Conference, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> That means that I will describe many scenes from the film, sometimes in a very detailed manner. These passages are set in a smaller type to set them apart from my commentary. I frankly admit that writing them was what I enjoyed doing most. Yet I will give no general synopsis of the film because I assume that anyone who is crazy enough to spend his time on reading this text will be familiar with the story anyway.

<sup>4</sup> This text grew out of some discussions I had with friends about *Fucking Åmål* and other favourite films of ours. I am pretty well aware that the result will strike most people as bordering madness. Let me assure you that I didn't plan to write down 30-plus pages when I started – I just got kind of carried away. Furthermore, I didn't plan to go public with this text when I began, I rather wrote it for myself to get clear about my own thoughts. But as I was writing, I began to think that it might be interesting to share these thoughts with others. If I had intended the text for publication I would have been under the obligation to make it much shorter in the first place, but since I still regard it as the outcome of a basically private experiment, I leave it as it stands. I know that this means that very few people in this world will actually find it worthwhile to read it. If those who still do found anything in it useful or illuminating, I would be glad. If any of them wished to comment on it, criticize or amend it, I would be absolutely delighted. Write to: kant1781(at)freenet.de

1. that I can avoid having the party
2. that Elin will notice me
3. that Elin will fall in love with me.

I LOVE ELIN!!!!!!!«

That's how it all begins and that's how Agnes is introduced to us. The one thing we learn about her during the opening sequences of the film is that she is terribly lonely. In school, she is a stranger who has no real friends and gets bullied and scoffed at by the other girls. And what may be even worse, she is a stranger at home too, although her family obviously deeply love and care for her. But there is this deep gulf of things unspoken between Agnes and her parents – »Mother hasn't understood anything anyway...!« –, there are the things that she confides only to her secret computer diary: that she has fallen in love with another girl. Agnes is profoundly unhappy with her life and it shows. Crying her eyes out, she complains about how nobody understands and accepts her as she is (least of all her mother) and that nobody could *possibly* ever love her, strange and ugly and wayward as she is. »What should I go on living for? I don't want to live! ... I want to die«, she cries and pushes away her father who patiently tries to console her. Agnes's anguish goes deep and sometimes makes her treat other people unjustly, even cruelly. Contrary to what has sometimes been said, she's not an angel and not a meek sufferer. Instead, she's a girl of remarkable strength – quiet and shy, but stern and steadfast as well. Yes, she dreams of leading a brighter life – »I'd rather be happy now than in 25 years!« –, but she won't beg for it and she won't deny herself in order to get it. She knows that she is a stranger among the others kids at school, she knows that she doesn't live up to the expectations of her family, but she never gets tempted to pretend to be someone else in order to be part of the crowd. Instead, Agnes drifts through the opening sequences of the film like the gloomy little sister of Tonio Kröger among a herd of sturdy blondes, intuitively recognized by everyone as an alien – someone who suddenly gives people an idea that and how things might be different elsewhere or in someone else's mind and so immediately provokes suspicion.<sup>5</sup>

Elin, on the other hand, seems to be the exact opposite of Agnes in every respect: Blond and blue-eyed, pretty and popular, she's the undeclared queen of the school, right in

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<sup>5</sup> German Nobel laureate Thomas Mann, who in some of his works described homoerotic love as explicitly as one could possibly do in the first years of the twentieth century, in fact described Agnes and Elin in a famous story, *Tonio Kröger*, first published in 1903, exactly 95 years before the premiere of *Fucking Amål*. If you don't believe me, check the following passages from the opening pages of that work, quoted from the translation by H.T. Lowe-Porter. Do not let yourself be deluded by the fact that the text speaks of two *boys*, Hans Hansen and Tonio Kröger, and don't worry about the details of their clothes. I'll leave it to you to guess who is who: »Hans wore a Danish sailor cap with black ribbons, beneath which streamed a shock of straw-coloured hair. He was uncommonly handsome and well built, broad in the shoulders and narrow in the hips, with keen, far-apart, steel-blue eyes; while beneath Tonio's round fur cap was a brunette face with the finely chiselled features of the south; the dark eyes, with delicate shadows and too heavy lids, looked dreamily and a little timorously on the world. (...) Tonio loved Hans Hansen, and had already suffered much on his account. (...) And not seldom he would think: »Why is it I am different, why do I fight everything, why am I at odds with the masters and like a stranger among the other boys? (...) They don't write verses, their thoughts are all about things that people do think about and can talk about out loud (...). These thoughts about himself and his relation to life played an important part in Tonio's love for Hans Hansen. He loved him in the first place because he was handsome; but in the next because he was in every respect his own opposite and foil. (...) [E]ver since Tonio Kröger had known him, from the very minute he set eyes on him, he had burned inwardly with a heavy, envious longing. (...) He made no attempt to be like Hans Hansen, and perhaps hardly even seriously wanted to. What he did ardently, painfully want was that just as he was, Hans Hansen should love him.« Don't worry, the rest of the story doesn't fit *Fucking Amål* at all, mainly because Hans Hansen turns out to be no Elin Olsson.

the centre of the in-gang of 14-year-olds. While Agnes spends her days and nights in isolation, reading and writing poetry, Elin and her friends are where it's at. And yet we soon start to realize that Elin, too, is profoundly dissatisfied with her life – and even that she, too, is *lonely*, although everything on the surface points to the contrary. Elin is, as Nina Persson sings, *an angel bored like hell waiting for the storm*. She's bored with her friends and their daily gossip about who's dating whom, about Leonardo di Caprio, hairstyling and make-up, with the boys who swarm around her like moths around the candle, and with the limited choice of things to do in a place like Åmål – basically, watching TV or meeting at someone's place or the late-night beer stall to get senselessly drunk. The feeling that there must be more to life than this is what sets Elin apart from her companions who just don't seem to understand what is driving her. They never take her seriously when she starts whining about how bored she is at the very thought of going through it all again next weekend. But Elin is dead serious, although she has of course absolutely no idea of what one could do instead or what exactly it is that she's looking for. When she keeps going on about »going to a rave« (something that has never been spotted in or around Åmål), this is just a cipher for that one big thing, new and unfelt and unheard of, that would change her life. But she can't get rid of the haunting suspicion that none of the things she tries in order to make it happen is ever going to work. How are you supposed to get high when the only drugs that you can get your hands on are your mother's heartburn pills? Having no access to the world of books or other intellectual stimulations that provide ways of escape for a girl like Agnes, Elin retreats to wild daydreaming about that day when she will be Miss Sweden or the world's greatest film star, or anyway, about that day when she will escape the *ennui* of her life by escaping from *fucking jävla-kuk Åmål*.

Apart from the fact that they are both unhappy with having to live in Åmål (though for quite different reasons), there is no connection whatsoever between Agnes and Elin when the film starts. Agnes's second secret wish, »that Elin will notice me«, is to be taken quite literally. The first time that Elin actually notices Agnes, that is, looks in her face, is when she opens the door of Agnes's very own room, in the night of the failed birthday party. Before that, Agnes is nonexistent for Elin. Whenever they meet in school, Agnes cannot get her eyes off Elin, whereas Elin looks right through her and has apparently never even heard her name. »Which Agnes?« is her only reaction when Camilla teases her by proposing that she should go to Agnes's party if she absolutely wanted to do something different for a change. One has to feel that Agnes's helpless lines, »You are my sun ... and I'm a little planet that revolves around you«, may in the end be quite adequate.<sup>6</sup>

Before I continue, I must dwell a little on the two leading actresses. I doubt that there is any superlative not yet bestowed on Rebecka Liljeberg and Alexandra Dahlström for their portrayals of Agnes and Elin. I would love to find more roses to throw at their feet, but my linguistic resources run out here. Dahlström and Liljeberg jointly won the Guldbagge Swedish National Film Award for »Best Actress in a Leading Role« in 1999, and indeed it is impossible to say which one of the two is more talented.

At first, one might tend to think that adorable, brown-eyed Rebecka Liljeberg has the greater theatrical resources. The wealth of feelings she conveys with just the subtlest and most nuanced expressions of her face, whose features seem to be constantly in motion, is breathtaking.<sup>7</sup> Anyone sharing the screen with her runs the risk of appearing like a block of wood beside her. Less talented actors would have to roll on the floor, scream, sob and wring their hands in order to capture even a tenth of the emotions that shine from Liljeberg's eyes and play around her lips like sunbeams. I'm not the first to point that out, of

<sup>6</sup> And, to be honest: Haven't we all written *exactly this* poem when we were sixteen? Well, I have.

<sup>7</sup> On his webpage which hosts a great archive of nearly every screen appearance Liljeberg has ever made, Sulo Kallas remarks that you would really have to watch her films in slow motion to get a full idea of the intricacy of her acting. I agree.

course. Marc Savlov, in what is one of my favourite reviews of *Fucking Åmål* (in *The Austin Chronicle*, April 2000), put it quite simply: »Liljeberg«, he laconically writes, »is a miracle. Her face is so eminently readable, watchable, invitingly hesitant that it defies description.« Note how perfectly Liljeberg has Agnes switch from loving affection for her father to tense rejection within seconds, how the exchange with her mother who has prepared roast beef for her vegetarian daughter's party delicately balances between resignation and ironic aggressiveness, and how she suddenly bursts from sullen suffering into a merciless attack on Victoria.

On the other hand, we have enchanting Alexandra Dahlström as Elin, and it would be completely unjust to highlight Liljeberg's performance against that of hers – in fact, Marc Savlov's phrase that I quoted above continues: »...and Dahlström is her emotional equal – two young actresses who invest these characters with so much personality that it almost makes you squirm.« Dahlström's greatest asset is her power-laden voice and her unbeatable timing for the comic (maybe the one thing that Liljeberg possibly lacks). It is no accident that she has virtually all the punch-lines of the script and that the enervated groan she utters whenever Elin is just short of *dying* of boredom and frustration has become one of the most beloved features of the film. Dahlström wonderfully embodies Elin's energy and suppressed rebellion. She especially sparkles in the scenes she has with Erica Carlson, who plays her sister Jessica. The long sequence in which the two sisters prepare for going out, get caught in the elevator half-naked and end up being condemned by their mother to spend the night at home with crisps and cola is hilarious. Note how Dahlström manages to make Elin's desperate attempts to get stoned on her mother's vitamin pills, culminating in her famous cry of frustration, »*Men jag vill knarkak!*«, appear overwhelmingly funny and heartbreakingly melancholic at the same time.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I have to add a personal footnote on Rebecka Liljeberg, even if that may seem out of place: It is a crying shame that after *Bear's Kiss* (a hapless and rather awkward film that, despite being made by an exceptional director and a first-rate cast, is saved from utter failure by Liljeberg's performance alone) she quit working as an actress. She has always, even on the summit of her success, declared that she would do so, explaining that she had been performing in stage and film productions ever since she had been a child and that it was time for her to do something new. She once said in an interview: »It doesn't feel like you make a contribution as an actress. (...) There is so much abundance (...). You get well paid and everybody attends to you. Still you know that you don't do anything useful.« Meanwhile, she has given birth to two children and is studying to become a doctor, and I feel nothing but deep respect for that personal decision of hers. But I do have to protest against the underestimation of her own art that I, as an admirer, find unacceptable. Leading a human life means more than enjoying physical health and social security. We need moral and spiritual nurture too, we feed on ideas and stories, ideals and beauty. Some may find all of this within their own minds, within their families or with their friends, but not everybody is that happy. It's the arts – books, songs, plays, films – that inspire us to think and explore how life could be lived and who we really want to be. That's why works of art can change people's lives. *Fucking Åmål* itself is a fine example: It gave joy and happiness to millions, but it also forcefully changed the reception of homosexual love among kids in Scandinavia and brought courage and self-esteem to many among them. Can you measure that against saving a human life as a doctor? Of course not. But is it something that »makes a contribution«? To my mind, it definitely is, and not a small one. And so (forgive me for being pathetic) the idea that Rebecka Liljeberg should have given up performing comes close to the idea of Joni Mitchell having given up singing, Hélène Grimaud having given up playing and Patti Smith (or Astrid Lindgren, for that matter) having given up writing in order to do »something useful« instead! I will never give up hope that someday this will be realized by someone (maybe one of the great European scriptwriters who should stand in line in front of her door just to beg for being allowed to write new roles for her) who can convince this amazing artist to contribute to our lives again.

### 3. Identity

*Fucking Åmål* tells the story about how Agnes and Elin become lovers. What is so special about their love that we care for them so much? My idea is that, in order to answer that question, we have to look closely at their story and think about what it really has got to tell us, what it really is about. So let me begin to develop my answer by starting with what I pointed out while introducing Agnes and Elin: The one thing they seem to have in common from the start is their feeling of being estranged from the people around them. They both feel that they somehow are (and wish to be) different from the way the world expects them to be. This shared feeling is what sets off their relationship.

From the very beginning, there is a telling difference between Elin on the one hand and her companions and Jessica on the other: Elin is not put off when she learns about the rumours that Agnes is a lesbian while she and Jessica inspect Agnes's room in the night of the disastrous birthday party. Whereas Jessica expresses disgust, Elin seems strangely taken with the idea. There's a certain kind of respect in her face, and right out of the blue she says: »I think it's cool. (...) I shall be that too.«

Lukas Moodysson has commented on that scene: »Elin has not thought at all about becoming a lesbian so far – it's just something she says. But I'm not sure of that.« Well, he can be pretty sure. For all we know, it seems clear that »I'll be a lesbian« belongs in the same category for Elin as »I'm gonna be Miss Sweden« or »I'll be the world's greatest film star«. It is a new name for her old dream of finding something that will make a difference to her life and make *her*, somehow, different. It is, so to speak, just a new version of »going to a rave« that she spontaneously tries out as a rather theoretical option, just to see how it fits her and how Jessica will react. She clearly does not at this point seriously think about *that way* of being different as her own way. It would be ridiculous to suppose that, on hearing the word »lesbian«, she all of a sudden began to question her sexual identity.

But Elin does recognize that being lesbian *really* means being excitingly different from fucking Åmål, so what she feels is that Agnes may turn out to be a kindred spirit, someone who rebels against being forced to live her life the way she is supposed to. Elin's respect for Agnes is real, therefore. When she first starts to develop an interest in Agnes, it's not emotional, let alone erotic affection that drives her – rather, it's this deeply felt respect, and a rather straightforward curiosity, of course.

We see this clearly when Elin returns to Agnes's place again later in the same night to apologize for the mean bet that she has let herself be tempted into.<sup>9</sup> Instead of leaving after her apology, she uses a pretext to get into Agnes's room again. And after two or three small-talk remarks about the music and Agnes's perfume, she can't hold it back any longer: »Is it true that you are a lesbian?« Ignoring Agnes's bewildered reaction (»What??«), Elin continues: »If you are, I understand that, because all the guys are so fucking disgusting. I'll be that too, I think.« It is surely just because of Agnes's general confusion and exhaustion at this point that she does not laugh at this remark. Instead, after looking slightly amused as if she wanted to say, »You don't know what the fuck

<sup>9</sup> She bet Jessica 20 Kronar that she would dare to kiss Agnes. One could ask why she would do such a thing to Agnes if she feels any respect for her (as I claim she does). But it's important to realize that the bet has in fact almost nothing to do with Agnes – it's entirely a fight between the two sisters in which Agnes is but a pawn. Jessica is clearly annoyed by her little sister, who unwaveringly refuses to disdain Agnes's lesbianism and even seems to side with the detested stranger against her own sister. That's why Jessica snaps at her: »If you think she's so bloody okay, then you can go out and snog her.« At that point, Elin's penchant for rebellious opposition, no matter against what, takes over. She does not come up with the bet in order to hurt Agnes, but to triumph over Jessica by accepting her provocation.

you're talking about«, she suddenly gets dead serious and fixes her eyes to the ground, biting her lips.

There is a striking contrast between Agnes's and Elin's way of thinking about being different which emerges here: Agnes has a clear idea of what her being different consists in. She has made a decision to accept that difference of hers, and it is hard to even imagine how much pain and tears it must have cost her to reach that decision all on her own. Agnes has, one could say, made the decision *to be herself*. Elin, by contrast, has made no such decision. And that is not only because she has as yet no clear idea of who she is or who she could be – it is rather because she obviously has not even understood that making decisions for yourself depends on *finding out who you want to be* at all. Otherwise, she wouldn't talk about being lesbian like about some kind of fashion style that you're free to adopt or not.

Elin's conception of being different still looks like some kind of mail-order catalogue. It contains everything that is somehow exotic and weird and makes you look more interesting: Raves, Italian lovers, a modelling career, lesbians, and other stuff you might try on if you think it may suit you. Note how Elin tries to express her most personal longing when she talks to Agnes on the bridge over the road to Stockholm that lies between their homes: »I want to be strange!«, she exclaims, and continues: »Or not strange, but I don't want to become like everybody else.« That is all she knows. But that is of course not enough. If you only feel that you want to go, but don't know the direction, you cannot take one single step. And that is precisely the reason for Elin's erratic behaviour and for her frustration.

Since Elin has not yet understood that it is all up to her to find out what *she herself* really wants, the only possible cause of her misery she can think of is the miserable place she is forced to live in (»We cannot live here! We must get out of here!«). Åmål, in other words, serves as a scapegoat for her. When she talks about her desire to be different, it all boils down to getting *out of Åmål*:

»Do you know what my nightmare is? That I will live here in Åmål forever and never get out of here. That I will have a family and children and a car and a house... all those things. And then my husband will leave me because he has met a younger and prettier one, and so I will just sit here with my kids who scream and nag... It's fucking meaningless.«

Elin blindly supposes that *any* other place must be better than the *fucking jävla kuke*-town she has been thrown into. And here we see again the difference between Agnes's and Elin's state of mind:

Directly after describing her nightmare, Elin suddenly turns to Agnes and asks: »Where are you from? I mean, where did you live before you moved here?« – »Mariefred«, answers Agnes. Elin seems strangely hopeful, as if waiting to receive signals from outer space or at least from a better part of the world, as she goes on asking: »Was it cool there? ... Funnier than here in Åmål?« But Agnes seems thoroughly uninterested. Shrugging her shoulders, she replies, »Not especially... maybe.«

Agnes, who has been around more than Elin, already knows what Elin yet has to learn: The problem of feeling estranged from the people around you is universal, especially when you grow up. It is the feeling that you are not the kind of person anymore that everybody wants you to be. It is the feeling that nobody knows or accepts who you *really* are. And Agnes knows that when you get seized by that feeling, it doesn't matter at all if you happen to live in Åmål, in Mariefred, in Stockholm or in New York City.

That's why Agnes never blames Åmål for her misery. What keeps you from being yourself is not a *place* but a *state of mind*, so it's the state of mind and not the place that you



have to get out of.<sup>10</sup> And *the only way to do that* is to find out who you are and *be yourself*. *Fucking Åmål* tells how Elin learns exactly this lesson. And my claim is that this is in fact the first thing which Agnes's and Elin's story has got to tell us and which makes it so special.

Let's look at how the lesson is brought home to Elin: When Agnes bitterly indicates that she has never had a girlfriend and doesn't expect ever to have one, Elin exclaims: »But this is really completely wrong! It's only because you live in fucking Åmål! It's so fucking unfair. If you had lived in Stockholm for example, you could have had as many girls as you wanted.« And suddenly, rushing toward the road, she decides that they should try to hitchhike to Stockholm. Elin fuses the two notions of getting out of Åmål mentally (being different) and geographically (hitching a ride to Stockholm). The resulting attempt to escape marks the first climax and the end of the first half of the film. And although you might think that the attempt fails, it really doesn't: Agnes and Elin never make it out of Åmål geographically, but what matters is that the very attempt makes Elin realize that in order to leave »Åmål« (the state of mind) you precisely don't have to leave Åmål (the place). This is what suddenly comes to her in the backseat of the Saab whose driver has agreed to drive them to Karlstad.

When the driver leaves the car to check his engine, the faces of the two girls in the backseat are lit for a second, and then disappear into the dark again. Agnes seems to burst with excitement and barely dares to look at Elin. But Elin seems just completely stunned. We can see in her face that she barely believes that this is really happening. She looks absent, as if she was watching herself from afar, and her gaze shows a certain kind of unbelieving perplexity. And it is precisely this perplexity about herself that makes Elin whisper, more to herself than to Agnes, as soon as the dark of the night covers them again: »What the hell are we doing? We must be out of our minds!«

But she knows fully well what they are doing, and she realizes in this very moment that here, in the car by the roadside, she *is* already out of »Åmål« – even though it's with one foot only. After all her idle talk about fleeing from Åmål's boredom, she has finally *done* it. She has done something for which there is no precedent in her life: To her own surprise, she has stepped out of line, she has acted *cool*, without actually leaving Åmål (the town) at all. *Sugarplum Fairy came and hit the street*, and she finally took the walk on the wild side that she had always been dreaming about.

When Agnes, beaming at her like an angel, joyfully answers: »Yes, I know«, this is evidence for Elin that, although she still is where she used to be, something fundamental in her life has changed. Still looking as if she couldn't believe that this is not a dream, but obviously thrilled out of her mind by the glory of the moment, she whispers to Agnes: »*Men vi är så jävla coola!*« And as if that finally carried her away, she suddenly starts to explore Agnes's lips, without announcement – tentatively at first, then expectantly, passionately in the end.

This, to my mind, is the true meaning of the kiss in the car. What Elin discovers in that car is that being different has nothing to do with just behaving weirdly, it has to do with daring to be yourself, and that in turn has nothing to do with being here, there, or anywhere, it has to do with taking your dreams seriously. Elin does not at this point realize all of a sudden that she is in love with Agnes<sup>11</sup> or that kissing a girl is just what she wanted to do all the

<sup>10</sup> If one regards »Åmål« as a state of mind instead of a town, it follows that the importance of the fact that *Fucking Åmål* is set in a Swedish provincial town is generally overrated, even though the film's provocative depiction of teenage life in such places seems to have caused nearly as much excitement in Sweden as its portrayal of a girl-girl romance. I am sure there are lots of allusions in the film that only Swedes who grew up in places like Åmål can detect and enjoy, but you obviously do not need to get them in order to realize what the film is about.

<sup>11</sup> And neither that Agnes is in love with her, as will become apparent later.

time. Elin doesn't kiss Agnes because of some kind of sudden awakening of a hidden lesbian identity. Finding out who you are just isn't that easy and doesn't happen that fast, and Moodysson's script is far too sophisticated to suggest that it does. What Elin understands here is not *what* she wants – it will take her almost the whole rest of the film to find out what that is – but rather that it all depends on herself to be what she wants to be. That is why Elin says what she says before she starts to kiss Agnes. She does not say »You are sweet«, or »I love you« or anything of that sort. What she says is, »We are so fucking cool!«, and given my reading of the scene, this is exactly the appropriate thing for her to say.

There is a direct link from this moment to the very last scene of the film which in a way fulfils the promise of that night: We see Agnes and Elin in broad daylight, in Elin's and Jessica's room, happy together. There is no more hiding and, for the moment, there is no more misery. *They are where they were all the time*, right there in the middle of Åmål, and yet, everything has changed: For mentally, they have walked out of »Åmål«, they have liberated each other and realized their difference.

Let me summarize my point like this: The first thing that is so special about Agnes's and Elin's love is how it reminds us that life is about finding out who you are – let's say, it's about identity, just to have a short and handy name for this idea. And so, I'd like to conclude, this is the first thing that *Fucking Åmål* is about: *It's all about identity, about being yourself, about being different.* This is not trivial. It is not something that is inherent in just any love story. Many love stories rather praise the unifying power of love, the way in which it can make you adapt and fit in with a community instead of exiling you from it. If the idea is to spell out what is so special about *Fucking Åmål* and the love between Agnes and Elin, this is the first part of my answer.

Before I continue, I would like to add that this reading allows one to give a rather balanced answer to a question that has been hotly debated among admirers of *Fucking Åmål*: Just how important for the message of the film is the fact that this is a *lesbian* love story?

There are two opposing answers to this question. The first one points out that this is, obviously enough, first and foremost a *lesbian coming out* film. That's why *Fucking Åmål* has been (and still is) screened to enthusiastic audiences at queer film festivals all over the world and is unanimously regarded as one of the best films ever made on the subject of homosexual teenage love by the lesbian and gay community.<sup>12</sup> But the second, opposing answer to the question underlines the fact that the film undeniably appeals to queer and straight audiences likewise, so there must be some kind of *universal* message to it. People who read the film that way tend to downplay the »lesbian element«, sometimes to the degree of denying it any significance at all. They rather highlight the notion of love *per se*, arguing that it »doesn't matter that Agnes and Elin are two *girls* in love, but that they are two girls in *love*«, as someone writing on *imdb.com* put it.<sup>13</sup>

I think that the right answer is somehow a middle path between these two opposing views. What is important to note is that *Fucking Åmål* is a story about identity and differ-

<sup>12</sup> A lesbian reviewer on *imdb.com* writes: »I watched this film in a theatre full of lesbians, and I think I am speaking for the majority when I say that *Fucking Åmål* was the representation in film we had been searching for.« In these days of identity politics, it is certainly remarkable in itself that a film featuring two straight actresses and made by a straight male director is so widely and deeply accepted in queer communities as a truthful and sensitive depiction of their struggle for recognition. It would have been particularly easy to dismiss *Fucking Åmål* as a cheesy piece of junk aimed at a male audience keen on watching two gorgeous young girls kiss each other. Lukas Moodysson honestly admitted to having been afraid of this charge in an interview with Aaron Krach for *IndieWire.com*: »When I started writing the script, it started out quite differently. When it developed into this story, with two girls, I thought: »No. I can't make this movie.« I thought people would think it was just my sexual fantasy or something.«

<sup>13</sup> It should also be noted that the makers of the film made quite a lot of statements that could be interpreted as an endorsement of this position.

ence. Being who you want to be means *liberating* yourself, and that is what *coming out* means. I think that this is what gay and lesbian spectators of the film immediately understand and appreciate because they have been through it. Therefore, while I do not want to claim that this story about being yourself could only be told as a queer story (there could obviously be other instantiations of it), I find it hard to think of a different way of telling it that would be as convincing and consequential. Even Romeo could have returned to Verona after splitting up with Juliet, and be welcomed back, because in the end, there was nothing wrong or *queer* with him as a person, he just chose someone from the wrong clan to be with. That »error« can be corrected. But Elin, after stepping out with Agnes, will never return and resume her old life, because she herself will never be considered the same anymore. She has literally outed herself, out of »Åmål«. So one should not right from the start assume that it *must* be the »universal« themes in this queer love story that are responsible for its success with straight folks – as if it was ruled out that these could be enchanted by precisely the *queer* elements in a queer love story! Of course there are »universal« themes of love and friendship in *Fucking Åmål*. But if I am right, there is also something that this lesbian love story *as a lesbian love story* has got to tell us about love, something that, marvellously, makes straight people find themselves admiring it, even – maybe – envying it. So, because of the centrality of the notions of identity and difference for the story that *Fucking Åmål* tells, one should take the »lesbian element« to it very seriously.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. Recognition

It's all about identity. But is that all that can be said? One could then ask: If that's what it's all about – identity, being yourself –, what's love got to do with it? If, for example, what Elin needs is to liberate herself from fucking Åmål, if what she learns is that she has to find out who she is and what she really wants, why should we assume that she needs Agnes in order to do that? Isn't this something she has to find out all by herself? And of course, these questions are justified. Indeed what I have said so far does not explain anything at all concerning the relationship between Agnes and Elin. But that only shows that the notion of identity, indispensable as it is, cannot be *all* there is to the story. There must be more, otherwise the story wouldn't be intelligible as a love story at all.

There are of course critics of the film who claim that exactly this is the case: They complain that the story lacks in credibility, since Agnes and Elin have, as it seems, nothing in common except a shared kind of *angst*. And that, the critics argue, does not constitute any reason for believing that, for example, Agnes should actually be interested in (let alone fall in love with) a person like Elin and vice versa. However, I think that this kind of criticism misses something that is essential for what *Fucking Åmål* is all about. To explain this, let us return for a moment to the beginning of the long scene on the bridge, right before the hitchhiking attempt.

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<sup>14</sup> If one feels one has to deny its importance in order to account for the immense appeal that the film has for straight audiences, one does also, whether one likes it or not, play into the hands of those who claim to love *Fucking Åmål* and the next moment express clearly homophobic attitudes and prejudice. Disputing the importance of the fact that this is a film about a lesbian coming out so to speak opens the door for *excusing* the fact that the two protagonists are girls, with something like, »This is not *really* homosexuality, it's just two perfectly normal girls in the turmoil of adolescence«. Moodysson must have sensed the danger of inviting this misinterpretation, for Agnes's masturbation scene is clearly designed to block this reading of the film. In the director's comment on the DVD, he said that the scene was meant to make it clear that Agnes is serious, »that there's some corporal love as well. So you understand she is really on to Elin. It had been too cute otherwise.«

Agnes and Elin approach the bridge, chatting, it seems, like any two girls would who have just met and try to get to know each other. »What do you want to be when you grow up?«, asks Elin, and, when Agnes hesitates, reveals herself: »I want to be a model. Or else I want to be a psychologist.«

Note that this line looks innocuous, but really is not. For the idea of becoming a psychologist is something that Elin could not have possibly disclosed to any of her friends or even to Jessica (who is facing the decision between taking the »family and caring« and the »hair-styling« course at school). It is a great mark of confidence that she speaks about it to Agnes so openly.

Agnes clearly senses that, for she takes Elin's idea very seriously and in turn trusts Elin far enough to reveal something intimate on her part, namely that she has also thought about becoming a psychologist, but that she really dreams about being a writer.

It is quite sensible to assume that Agnes, too, has never revealed this to anyone. With whom could she talk about things like that? Now it is Elin who tries her best to take Agnes's plan seriously, although the idea of writing books must be something that she has never spent a single thought on.<sup>15</sup>

What the scene on the bridge shows us is that there is a growing bond of trust between the two girls. They seem to have realized that they have found someone to open up to. Other proofs for this are of course Elin's avowal of her yearning to be different and of her secret nightmare. And the avowal that Agnes makes immediately afterwards isn't any less intimate, though easier to overlook:

»Can I ask you something?«, Elin asks Agnes and, after Agnes has agreed, shocks her with the question: »Have you been with many girls before?« Agnes is visibly tormented with that turn of things and tries to dodge the question: »What? Why do you ask?« – »I was just wondering«, Elin replies. Grudgingly, Agnes forces herself to answer. Her voice is cold and betrays how deeply wounded she is: »No, I have not »been with many girls«, if you need to know. When you kissed me today... it was the first time.« – Elin seems devastated: »Was it?« – »Yes,« Agnes sighs, bitterly, »the first and the last time.«

What is important to note here is that, despite all her reluctance, Agnes clearly and for the first time admits (if only indirectly) that she does indeed love girls.<sup>16</sup> True, she is visibly hurt by having to talk about it. But she does after all answer Elin's question.

Why is this important? Because it shows that both Agnes and Elin *realize who they are only as they open up to each other*. In a way, they only get an idea of who they are because they mirror each other, they discover what they want to be by being together. They need each other in order to find out about their respective identities. That is easy to see in the case of Elin, who has never before seriously thought about the things she discusses with Agnes.

Three or four days after their talk on the bridge, Elin sits on a park bench with Jessica, Johan and Marcus and suddenly declares, »I want to become a psychologist« – or rather, these words seem to pop from her mouth like a faint greeting from Agnes and Elin seems as surprised as everybody to hear them. Needless to say, the idea is met with nothing but derision from her friends.

<sup>15</sup> It is just for Moodysson's fine sense of humour that he lets Elin, who has certainly not read too many books in her life, come up with the idea that writing psychology books would consist in writing about mass murderers.

<sup>16</sup> Another beautiful element is Agnes's hidden declaration of love for Elin, who asks, innocently, if Agnes thinks that she is pretty enough to become a model. »Yes, you are«, says Agnes, softly, walking half a step behind Elin, and then suddenly throws a frightened look at her, fearing that Elin could realize that this was more than a neutral description on Agnes's part. But of course, Elin doesn't. Not yet.

But in view of the way Elin defends herself, it has clearly begun to dawn on her that life may have options in stock for her beyond »hairstyling« and »family care«. That's what she has been daydreaming about all the time, of course, but Agnes is actually the first person to back her up in *believing* in this dream (compare the way Agnes reacts to Elin's confession and how Elin's friends do).<sup>17</sup> In fact, Agnes is the first person who takes Elin's dreams *seriously* and who thereby makes her realize that they could be more than dreams. Remember Elin's nightmare: In a way it is Agnes who makes Elin believe that this nightmare does not have to become true. That's the seed she plants in Elin's heart: The only way to make your dreams come true is to take them – and so take *yourself* – seriously. Above I said that what Elin realizes as she sits in the backseat of the Saab is that it is all up to her to be herself. Now we see that it is Agnes who has taught her that lesson, simply by letting her feel that she believes in her. This crucial element of the story is beautifully encapsulated in the following little passage:

»Why are you so strange?«, asks Elin, and continues, »I mean, don't get me wrong, but you are strange.« Smilingly, Agnes skips the question and replies: »You are also strange.« And that is of course the greatest compliment that Elin can think of. Being *strange*, being *different*, is what she *yearns* to be. »Really?«, she asks in disbelief, and then she suddenly erupts into a confession that is the most honest thing she has ever said: »I want to be strange! Or not strange, but I don't want to become like everybody else. Though sometimes I think that I am already like everybody else.« Agnes's answer is quiet, earnest and full of affection: »But you aren't«, she says, in a soft voice.

In this little, inconspicuous answer lies the seed of what is to become their love. Indeed, this *is* a declaration of love, as far as Agnes is concerned – there is no person on Earth that could be more special to her than Elin. But for Elin, this little »you aren't« discloses an entirely new thought, namely that someone recognizes her as special *just like she is*. Agnes makes her see that *being herself already makes her special*, indeed, unique.<sup>18</sup>

And what about Agnes? What does Elin have to offer her? Well, how about this: Until this night on the bridge, people Agnes knew were divided into two categories for her: Those who love her but have no idea who she is, and those who do have an idea but despise her for it. Elin, whom she loves, is the first to know about her and show her respect, even affection. And so Elin is the first human being who enlightens a spark of hope in Agnes's heart that maybe she will *not* have to wait 25 years, that there may be happiness for her – that, as *Show Me Love* and about five thousand other pop songs go, *everything's gonna be alright*. Elin in all her simplicity and honesty says: »If you had lived in Stockholm for example, you could have had as many girls as you wanted.« Again, these words look inconspicuous, but think of what they mean to Agnes. It does not matter at this stage that she does not want any other girl on Earth than the one she is actually talking to. What matters is that she has been in the grip of the idea that *nobody* could ever love her, nobody who really knew

<sup>17</sup> There are other, small but significant examples for this: Compare how Agnes reacts to Elin's modeling dream and how Jessica does (»You're too short.«). And note how all the eccentric things Elin says or proposes (»Let's rob a pensioner«) are routinely shrugged off as wound up and not serious anyway by Camilla and her gang. But when Elin tries to get Agnes to accompany her to Christian's party by saying, »Come on, we'll go there and burn their house down«, a way of putting it which is so like her, Agnes understands perfectly well what Elin wants to express. She just smiles and agrees to come.

<sup>18</sup> Let me note in passing that this is one of the scenes that show Lukas Moodysson's giftedness as a playwright. He brilliantly uses the few moments he has to establish a relationship between Agnes and Elin that will carry the rest of the film, that will make us buy into the idea that we witness the birth of a love that is actually worth fighting for. Every single phrase of the conversation has got its meaning, every one is necessary, none is superfluous. At the same time, the dialogue doesn't sound flashy, there are no polished phrases, no large concepts, no great gestures. It just seems to be plain, everyday teenagers' talk. One of the criteria of high art is to make what is terribly difficult to do look easy, to let what is the result of virtuoso techniques appear just natural. Just that is the case here.

who she is, that is. After all, she tried to commit suicide just half an hour ago. But upon hearing Elin's remark, we see something hitherto unseen, something wonderful: Agnes laughs. »Do you think so?«, she asks, and Elin says, slightly astonished as it seems: »Yes!« That confidence is the seed that Elin plants in Agnes's heart: *You will be found*. Without that spark, I believe, Agnes's super cool reaction to the provocations she has to endure later on, after Victoria has spread the news that Agnes is lesbian all over school, wouldn't be conceivable. So again, what we have here is that old pop song favourite: *You will be loved, just as you are, for what you are*.

What this shows is that, paradoxical as that may sound, *being yourself is something that you cannot do alone*. There is a certain kind of misconception of the notion of identity which makes one believe that either you blindly adapt to the standards that your peers and elders have set for you or you walk away as a rebellious, independent, but desperately unhappy loner. But there is a third option, and *love* is the key to it: You can only find yourself in the eyes of someone who loves you. You need someone who recognizes you as special *in order to even find out* who you are. You need recognition by those you love in order to learn to be yourself. And that is why Agnes and Elin could not have made it on their own. They liberate themselves from fucking Åmål just because they trust each other, recognize each other, and in the gaze of each other find what they truly want to be. They do not connect because, »deep inside«, they turn out to be the same kind of person. They are good for each other exactly because, despite the things they do have in common and despite the multiple ways in which they adapt to each other all the time, they are still very *unlike* each other. They connect as the two different persons they are. Either one needs the other, first because in her she finds just what she has been missing, but also because in her eyes *she finds a picture of herself* that mirrors her as the uniquely special person she has been all the time but just couldn't see. That reciprocal *recognition* is, I believe, the true seed of their love story, which means that in order to understand this story, it is important to pay attention to Agnes's and Elin's conversation on the bridge, not exclusively to their kiss in the car.<sup>19</sup>

That Agnes and Elin reciprocally need and recognize each other is one of the things that make them so beautiful to look at together. There is no Cinderella here and no prince who comes to rescue her. Instead, we have two lovers who help each other to achieve their love on equal terms. Moodysson's script is elegantly composed so as to bring this out on multiple occasions: For example, while it is Elin who starts the whole idea of fleeing from Åmål and runs down to the road, she wouldn't have brought off so much as even an attempt to hitch a ride to Stockholm had not Agnes mildly informed her that she was standing on the wrong side of the road.

And, more decisively, when the fifth car suddenly stops and stands there in the black night, blinking like something just landed from outer space, Elin suddenly seems paralyzed by fear of her own courage. Her reaction is terribly telling, she just mutters, »Shit!«, looking at the car, then at Agnes, then at the car again. This is the moment when she realizes that the time has come to actually *do* what she has always been talking about, and suddenly she seems thunderstruck, unable to move on. Her eyes betray that she is in imminent danger of withdrawing. In that moment, however, Agnes seems to inherit Elin's spirit. She who has until this moment just let herself be guided around by Elin's questions and proposals, suddenly takes control: »We do it! We'll just do it!« she rejoices, breathlessly. While Elin is standing still and hesitatingly asks, »Shall we?«, Agnes is already running towards the car and excitedly shouts »But come on!« over her shoulder. Now it is her who does all the talking, instantly making up a crude story about how the two of them came to end up on the road in the middle of the night and need to get »back« to Stockholm, while Elin stands doubtfully beside the

<sup>19</sup> Which in turn means that the critics who suppose that the key to their love must lie in the *kiss* and then dismiss it as not credible just look in the wrong place.

car, looking as if she regretted having started this adventure. Only when Agnes hops into the car does she follow, and only when the door closes behind her and when the driver leaves the girls alone for a moment to check the engine does she realize that together they have indeed done the impossible: They have opened a door for the two of them that leads out of Åmål.

The result of that realization, as I tried to show above, is their kiss – and everything that follows from it. Elin has finally found someone who shares her dream and together with whom she has started to realize that dream. *Together*, and only together, they can be *fucking cool*. This is what forges the tie between them.

The reciprocity of Agnes's and Elin's recognition is especially easy to overlook. Many critics take it that Elin is the only driving force behind the development of the story, that she is the prince who lends her helping hand to a passive, wordlessly languishing Agnes. Indeed, on a superficial reading, it is easy to get that impression because that is how things seem to stand in the very beginning of the film as well as in the end, when Elin presents Agnes as her new girlfriend. But it is important to see how what Agnes and Elin actually do achieve is achieved by them together and couldn't have been done by one alone.<sup>20</sup> And what's more, even the roles they are supposed to play do completely change in the course of the story: Look at the situation as it presents itself just moments before the final scenes of the film:

Elin drags Agnes into the school closet, imploringly keeping on at her, »This is very important! This is very important! Please! Please! I just want to tell you one thing!« Agnes shrugs her off, leaning against the wall, grimly folding her arms, barking at Elin, »And, what is it that you want to say?« Faced with Agnes's contempt, Elin seems afraid to continue, as if she wasn't sure if approaching Agnes was the right thing to do.

But the true reason for her hesitation is something else: She is not uncertain whether what she does is the right thing to do, she is just terrified of being rejected. She is going to confess that she has fallen in love with Agnes, she is going to offer her love to the person that she has betrayed and let down, so she is well aware that Agnes has every reason on Earth to coldly answer, »No, thank you«. And Elin knows that Agnes is strong enough to answer exactly this way – meaning that now *Elin* is the one who is pleading and begging for *Agnes's* affection. If Elin kept a diary, she could well have written a secret wish list that morning with »...that Agnes will (again) notice me« on it. So compared to the opening scene of the film, Agnes and Elin have completely changed roles.

Let me summarize my point like this: The second thing that is so special about Agnes's and Elin's love is how it incorporates the idea that finding out who you are is something that you cannot achieve on your own. In order to even get to know who you are, you need to find yourself recognized as someone special in the eyes of someone who loves you. Again, just to have a short name for this idea, let us call this the notion of recognition. And so this is the second thing that *Fucking Åmål* is about: *It's all about recognition, about finding someone in whose eyes you can find yourself*. Again, this is not trivial. It is not something that is inherent in just any love story. Many love stories (especially in »teen movies«) work on the worn-out *Cinderella* scheme instead: In this kind of story, there are two lovers from different ends of the social spectrum (say: shy, poor and plain vs. popular, rich and pretty), but one of these ends is considered as the rightful, respectable and desirable standard, while the other end is marked as different, deviant and inferior. In order to find fulfilment, the lover from the latter end must be taught to adapt to the standard: The ugly duckling must be turned into a swan. The deviant character is thus reshaped and then wel-

<sup>20</sup> The most striking, marvellous demonstration of this is the coming out scene which I save for the last.

came into the preferable class of people on the other end of the spectrum (some minor, »morak« changes on part of the more sympathetic members of that class as to being more tolerant are usually allowed), while her peers who are left behind at the lower end of the spectrum have to console themselves with being proud of the social ascent of their former companion. But it is clear that *Fucking Åmål* has no resemblance at all to this pattern. It would have if Elin and Agnes had indeed built up a girl friendship in the course of which Elin had managed to make Agnes change her style, put on more make-up, stop reading all this poetry and go to parties instead, then had introduced her as a new member into Camilla's gang and finally matched her with Bengtsson. Thanks God, Moodysson has a different kind of vision of what love is all about. If the idea is to spell out why we long and pray so much to see Agnes and Elin win through, this is the second part of my answer.

## 5. Commitment

It's all about identity, and it's all about recognition. But obviously, something important is still missing. One might feel that by carving out the notions of identity and recognition and how they hang together, one understands why something happens between Agnes and Elin in the night of Agnes's birthday, how their love gets started. But that is literally only half of the story. How does their love *grow*? And does it at all?

The last question is not as rhetorical as it may sound. Indeed, quite a few critics of *Fucking Åmål* complain that the end of the film appears somehow dubious to them. It clearly suggests that Elin has fallen in love with Agnes and has decided to stand by her. But, the critics claim, this is not credible at all, given Elin's erratic and irresponsible personality. Her change from »I want to be cool«-Elin to »I am in love with Agnes«-Elin is, they say, completely unmotivated and happens out of the blue. One of the prime reasons behind this kind of reaction seems to be that, after the kiss, Elin and Agnes do not meet again until the end of the film when Elin confesses her love (except for a rather short and violent encounter in front of the cafeteria, when Agnes slaps Elin for disowning her).

What has to be pointed out in the face of this kind of criticism is that it is a fatal mistake to think that Agnes and Elin do not interact after the night of Agnes's birthday just because they do not appear in the same scenes. No one has found a more beautiful picture for that than Marc Savlov, who writes:

»The recurrent theme of teenage emotional waffling – she wants me, she wants me not – is done with the utmost sincerity; you can almost hear the subtle quickening of heartbeats as Agnes and Elin perform one of the most shy and lovestruck *pas de deux* in screen history, a flurry of feints and dodges, recriminations and resolutions.«

The *pas de deux* is a dance figure where the two partners do not touch and do not even see each other and yet dance together, subtly tuned in to each other, blindly reacting to what the other one does. I suggest that if we look at the second half of the film as a *pas de deux*, we will find everything that the critics say is missing: First, how transparently Moodysson depicts a fundamental change in Elin's character that gives full credibility to the happy ending that the film suggests, and secondly, how this change in character leads up to Elin's decision to commit to her love for Agnes. That way, we will find another notion that is indispensable for understanding what *Fucking Åmål* is about.

So let us return to the road to Stockholm, late in the night of Agnes's birthday, when Agnes and Elin have just been thrown out of the car in which they both realized that together they had actually made it out of Åmål (the state of mind) for some magic moments:



Now, they stand at the roadside under the dead cold light of a street lamp, freezing and shaking in their thin clothes, and the magic is gone. They stand about five meters apart from each other, as if they were afraid to get that close again. »I must go home now«, mutters Elin, seemingly half-numbed by the cold, »My mother is going to be home soon and...« She looks terribly lost in that moment. A torturing question has visibly started to haunt her: *What the hell has happened? What the fuck does that mean?* Her strength still suffices to promise to Agnes that she will phone her the next day. But she does not look at her when she says that, as if she were afraid to look in her eyes again. When Agnes, on disappearing into the dark of the night, swiftly kisses her lips, Elin flinches, irritated.

As the following day evolves, Elin has to face the fact that she is not going to get rid of the experience of the night before. She kissed Agnes out of excitement, thrilled by the thought that being together with her had made her act so *jävla* cool as never before in her life. But obviously, the kiss started something that has grown out of control. Elin looks at herself and just can't believe what is going on with her. It's not only that she seemed unable or unwilling to stop kissing Agnes. It's also the disturbing fact that in the wake of the kiss, she *dreamed that somebody loved her* – that the whole world faded away and left only her and Agnes behind, floating in a gaze of distant sounds, silently caressing each other. And then, there's Jessica's unnerving confidence when she says, despite Elin's protests, »I see that you are really in love! I can see it in your face!« Elin has to admit to herself that there's something going on, but she doesn't see what it is. Obviously, kissing Agnes has somehow changed the way she feels about her, and an unspeakable idea of what this could mean has forced itself on her the very moment she woke up – her consternation testifies to that –, but then this idea seems just too mad to be taken seriously into account for the moment. Elin only knows that what seemed an exciting game in the secluded back of an anonymous car in a strange, outlandish night has turned into something dead serious by the harsh light of day. She realizes immediately that admitting to her friends that she spent the night with Agnes and kissed her for real would, in a rather literal way, mean *the end of the world as she knows it*. So after a half-hearted attempt to call Agnes that gets interrupted by Jessica who is curious to find out whom her little sister might have been with the night before, Elin falls into despair.

We see her torment in her face when she almost madly exclaims that she could never tell Jessica with whom she has spent the night because Jessica would hate her and never talk to her anymore, and that she is not going to phone or ever see this person again. When Jessica gets suspicious and accuses her of fooling around with Marcus, Elin sees no other option than to downright disown Agnes and, in search of an excuse, claim that it was Johan Hult she was with the night before – the most wildly implausible white lie one can imagine, by the way.

From that moment on, Elin is torn in the middle. Together with Agnes, Elin has taken one step out of Åmål, but her second foot is still back in the place where she used to live. So now there she is, standing in splits above an abyss. On the other side, Agnes is waiting for her and something she has as yet no name for is drawing her towards that girl. But on this side of the abyss there is Jessica, her friends, in a word: Åmål. And now, it is clear, the prospect of being out of that place *and* state of mind, of leaving it all behind, doesn't look as glorious as before. Elin is simply scared to death by the prospect of blowing to pieces everything that she has considered her life so far. So again, there she is, standing in splits above an abyss, and doesn't know what to do: Pull back her foot. Or leap.

We can see this in the evening, when we find her with her mother, in front of the television, watching a ridiculously old-fashioned game-show. Lying motionlessly on the couch and seemingly entirely robbed of her spirits, she stares at the screen with an

empty expression on her face. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, she tells her mother: »I'm a lesbian«, and, after a pause, adds: »Homosexual.« It seems clear that this is some kind of experiment, but obviously not one aimed at a reaction from her mother, as Elin doesn't even wait for her to react. After only a second, staring at the TV again, she mutters: »No, I'm only joking«, and since she is known for jokes of that kind, her mother does not even bother to ask again.

This experiment seems rather to be one for Elin herself: It seems that she hesitatingly, doubtfully tries how it sounds to utter these words, to try them on, as it were – but not like before, when she light-heartedly declared that she was »going to become a lesbian too«. Suddenly, these words have acquired a new, rather uncomfortable meaning. The rest of *Fucking Åmål* tells about how Elin tries to cope with this situation. It is a long and winding road she has to walk in order to do the right thing, and she herself changes fundamentally within this process.

At first, Elin does in fact opt for pulling back her foot. She backs away from the abyss and withdraws – back to fucking Åmål. This is not so much a conscious choice of hers, she rather lets it happen. She lets Jessica talk her into joining all the others down at the beer stall and lets her arrange a tête-à-tête with Johan Hult who happens to be there too. Elin seems content to give away responsibility for her actions. After all, not having to take decisions for herself eases the burden she has been aching under for the last 24 hours. And the best way of course to rid yourself of the burden of consciously deciding for yourself is getting drunk.

So when Elin asks Johan if he had something to drink and determinedly empties a bottle of booze, she has already been swallowed again by what she managed to escape the night before. Obviously sloshed, she starts to make out with Johan. The next morning, she has made up her mind: She is willing to conquer whatever remains of the night she spent with Agnes. When Agnes, who has been waiting for her call all the foregoing day, at last phones her that morning, Elin hangs up without hesitation and continues to dress: Johan is waiting for her outside, she's with him now. They go for a ride on his moped and spend the rest of the weekend together with Jessica and Marcus. Elin is back in Åmål. When she meets Agnes again in school on Monday morning, she is cold as ice and makes it absolutely clear that, as far as she is concerned, their night together has never happened. When Agnes rushes after her outside the school cafeteria and complains: »You wanted to call me! Did you forget?«, Elin flatly disowns her, pretending that she doesn't even know what she means: »What? What are you talking about?« Madly, Agnes slaps her and rushes away to run amok in her room and pour her heart out to her diary: »Why am I so stupid? Why do I love Elin? I hate her and I love her at the same time. I love her so much that my heart will burst. But nobody has ever hurt me as much as she did. She scoffs at me and tramples upon me and still I love her.«

More important for the further development of the story, however, is what happens after Agnes's attack and subsequent flight. Elin, furiously, yells after her: »What the hell are you doing? Are you completely mad? Fucking dyke!« You don't need knowledge of Freud to understand how much self-defence lies in that insult. Elin violently tries to ward off what she secretly fears to be. Since Camilla has witnessed the whole scene and immediately starts asking questions, Elin has to pretend to have no idea of why Agnes should have done what she did.

The answer, however, is provided by Victoria, who, trying to make herself important and taking revenge for Agnes hurting her on her birthday, outs Agnes with the words: »Listen to me. She is in love with you. ... She has been for a long time! She has written about you. That is true!« And now it's Elin's turn to run away: After stunnedly shaking

her head and muttering, »What? No! How do you know... shit!«, she turns and hurries away, looking as distraught as never before.

In order to understand the central importance of this scene for the continuation of the story, we have to remember something that can be easily forgotten: Up to that point, Elin did not know that Agnes loved her. How could she? Agnes has never said or done anything to let her know, except, maybe, not shying away when Elin started to kiss her. The revelation of this piece of information to Elin is the single most important catalyst for her change of attitude. Learning that Agnes loves her destroys Elin's attempts to ignore or suppress her own uncanny feelings for her. It is easy to talk yourself into believing that you do not feel anything special for another person if you can assume that the person in question does not feel anything special for you. But if you were haunted by uncertainty about the true nature of your feelings all the time – if you had a hard time persuading yourself that you are *not* in love and of course not »one of those«, as Camilla would put it –, then finding out that the person you feel attracted to does indeed admit being in love with you and even having been in love with you for a long time will almost certainly shatter your fabrications. Elin is obviously thrown back into the turmoil that she tried to free herself from by dating Johan. That gets immediately clear from what happens next: Elin sleeps with Johan. Now remember that this is the very same girl who was so proud of never having slept with any of her so-called boyfriends and who self-consciously declared, »No-one is going to stick anything inside me!« just a few days ago. Furthermore, she is with a boy whom she definitely does not love, and worse, whom she is only dating as a result of some kind of curious accident anyway. So there must be a strong reason indeed for Elin to do what she does and the only reason one can think of is that she wants to quench her doubts, no matter how. Sleeping with Johan is the last, the only means left to her to prove to herself and to everyone that she *is*, after all, *just like everybody else*. In a way, she tries to sleep herself straight. It's the ultimate card she can play. If *that* does not work to bring her back to Åmål, to erase that strange longing in her heart, then nothing will.

But of course, it does not work. And as she feels that it doesn't work, Elin begins to realize that she cannot run away. Gradually, she undergoes a visible transformation that starts in the very moment when she is in bed with Johan: While she's lying next to him, her eyes are set on something seemingly far away, and there is a certain peaceful smile on her face that has not been there before. There is an air of absence around her that gets stronger and stronger in the following scenes. Concerning these scenes, I would like to echo Marc Savlov: Alexandra Dahlström is a miracle. Compare the way she embodied Elin in the beginning of the film: loud, energetic, robust, sexy and vulgar at times. Now she transforms Elin into a girl full of longing and melancholy, dreamy, fragile and thoughtful. Elin's long journey back to the abyss has begun. Slowly, what seemed unthinkable takes shape before her mind's eye: that she wants to be with Agnes even more than she wants to be home again, that she has to go back to her, go back to that place where they already were in that night. Alexandra Dahlström lets us feel every single aspect of Elin's state of mind, her never-abiding fear and sadness of having to say goodbye to her childhood life, and yet, the dawning of bliss springing from understanding that she might have found the unexpected, that someone might want her precisely for being who she is. This state of mind is clearly brought out in one of the quintessential but most underrated scenes of the film, when Elin and Jessica sit in the ice-hockey stadium, watching their boyfriends play. Almost translucent, Dahlström floats through this scene like an angel.

Elin seems to have completely lost touch with her surroundings. When Jessica asks her if she is happy to be together with Johan, she sighs, »I guess I am«, but she does not seem to care much. When Jessica suggests giving Marcus a roasting for spreading lies concerning Elin's alleged promiscuity, Elin is not interested at all: »No, there's no

need. It doesn't matter«, she mutters, lost in thought, without showing any visible sign of emotion. Elin, it is clear, is not a part of this world anymore, where things like that matter. She is already on her way out of Åmål. Jessica of course cannot know the reasons for her strange behaviour and gets angry when, on carefully inquiring whether there is something wrong with Elin, she gets nothing but more and more nondescript answers. She cannot but interpret her sister's behaviour as her – as she sees it – usual selfishness, as a sign that she has already lost interest in her newest toy. »God!«, she exclaims, »I'm so tired of it. You change your opinions all the time! First you think nothing of Johan and then all of a sudden you fall in love with him. ... But still you are never satisfied. You always get exactly everything that you want!« That is the only moment when Elin awakens from her trance and snaps at Jessica with sparks flying from her eyes: »What – get everything that I want? What do you know about that? What the hell do you know about that?« Directly afterwards, we find her on her bed, staring at the ceiling, lost in dreams, and we can only assume that it is Agnes that her mind is set on.

Elin is now ready to admit to herself that, despite her own struggling and squirming, *what she wants* is Agnes. And at that point, it is clear, a change has taken place whose significance can hardly be overrated. Before that change, Elin could light-heartedly declare, »I'm going to be a lesbian«, just like »I'm going to be Miss Sweden«, as if this was some kind of game up for people to play in order to attract more attention. But Elin has realized that this is not a game. We have witnessed how the sheer thought of seriously being in love with a girl scared the guts out of her, so much so that she even slept with the next best guy available in order to get rid of that feeling. She has understood that being different out in the bright light of the day is no fun, that it is dead serious if you and all the people around you come from Åmål (the state of mind). But that means that one *cannot*, as the critics I mentioned at the beginning of this section would have it, explain Elin's hard-won decision to return to Agnes as resulting just from her drive for new sensations, from her desire to be cool. *She is over that*. She is not that kind of person any more. This is beautifully brought out in the last scene on the playground, when Jessica asks Elin to step down from one of the famous »A-drains«.

Only days ago, when Jessica and Elin were on their way to Agnes's birthday party, Elin was grateful when Jessica pushed her down from an A-drain she had stepped on (a sign for bad luck). But now, all Jessica gets as she lists all the evils that will befall Elin if she doesn't listen to her (»AIDS, abortion, acne, anal sex, anorexia...«) is a rather enervated remark: »*But grow up!* ... Are you still in nursery school?«

Now remember the sisters' relationship in the beginning of the film: How Jessica embodied the voice of reason for Elin, how was busy worrying about her reputation and trying to prevent her from getting in trouble, gently mocking and yet lovingly forgiving her for all her childish rage and aimless rebellion. But now it is *Elin* who tells *Jessica* to stop playing children's games when the matter is serious, to *grow up* just like she has. She has outgrown her sister in outgrowing Åmål. This is not the slightly sluttish little bombshell who yells »I am so fucking pretty!« every time she looks at herself in a mirror. Elin knows now what she wants and that's the reason for her otherworldly appearance in the latter scenes of the film. She is on her way out of Åmål, and all that Jessica can do is to shout after her, uncomprehendingly: »You are not normal! You just aren't fucking normal!«

Understanding this development of Elin's character is a prerequisite to understanding that the film's ending is not unmotivated, but rather entirely believable and consequential. We can then see what the entire second half of *Fucking Åmål* is about: It tells us that in order to achieve love you have to *commit*, unconditionally, without precaution. Letting yourself fall in love means taking a leap of faith, jumping an abyss with no safety net except the belief that your love will save you. Maybe this element is the one that is most brilliantly

captured by Lukas Moodysson. He lets us see how Elin's decision to stand by Agnes openly and unconditionally does not come out of the blue. Rather, we accompany her on her way, and we can even recognize as such the very moment when that final decision of hers is formed: I'm talking about the scene in which Elin, Jessica, Marcus and Johan watch the bingo lotto show on television, obviously because there is nothing else to do. There couldn't really be a more telling picture to illustrate how real Elin's fear of »becoming just like everybody else« in Åmål is.

Elin can hardly stand the leaden boredom of the situation. When she complains, she gets the usual »Be quiet!«-type responses she always receives. This time, however, Elin has enough. After uttering one of her angry groans, she just walks out. We find her again on the bridge over the road to Karlstad and Stockholm. She seems to be doing nothing, just spitting over the railing. Judging from the wet patch on the asphalt under the bridge, she has been doing this for quite a while.

Apart from that, nothing seems to happen in that short scene. It has been misinterpreted as just another vivid picture of the existential boredom of living your life in Åmål. But that is, I think, a fundamental mistake. There is much more to it. It is no accident that Elin stands on this bridge. I said above that she knows now that she must return to the abyss that separates her from Agnes, that she must go back to the point where she left her in that night. And that is what she does: She is standing at precisely the spot where she and Agnes recognized each other, sharing their most secret dreams and fears. She is standing on the bridge over the road out of Åmål, trying to hit one of the cars just like the one that nearly carried the two away. She is standing on the bridge that she has to cross to get to Agnes's place. Now if you take the meaning of that location into account, the entire scene gets a different air. There is a very remarkable essay by one Anthony from England, *The Incredibly Beautiful Story of Two Girls in Love*, in which an overall interpretation of the role of the bridge in the film is offered. I quote it at length because I find it so illuminating:

»The bridge that passes over the road to Stockholm clearly comes to represent Elin's change and her growing attraction to Agnes since whenever she crosses it she becomes both more attached with Agnes and less attached with her friends. Initially she crosses it to meet and attend Agnes's party, ironically to see if there are any new and unknown boys there. While there, she bets with Jessica to kiss Agnes (...). [S]he crosses the bridge again to apologise to Agnes and they become closer. On her way back to Christian's party, managing to convince Agnes to return with her, they only partly cross the bridge illustrating her distance and lack of intention of joining her friends (...). The bridge also crosses the road where they attempt to hitchhike to Stockholm and where they share their first real kisses. The bridge is where we find her just before she dumps Johan. She is clearly pensive, and we can intimate that she's probably deciding to end it with Johan, while spitting at the cars as they pass beneath her, indicating her thoughts are on Agnes and the times they'd be sharing away from Åmål if only they had been able to continue on in one of the cars. (...) Finally at the close of the film they are seen in Elin's room implying Elin no longer needs to cross the bridge to become at one with Agnes and is therefore comfortable with who she is in her own world. This also illustrates why Agnes never visibly crosses the bridge during the film: it is up to Elin to meet her, Agnes is already where Elin wants to be.«<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Lukas Moodysson would probably deny that he had any intention of using the bridge location in this symbolist way, but that, as they say, doesn't matter: One of the beautiful things about art is that there is more inside it than even its authors have any idea of.

What interests me for the moment is the idea, with which I completely agree, that when we see Elin on the bridge, musing, we witness the very moment of her decision that she must go for it. It is only natural that this should happen right where she and Agnes forged her bond. From the very moment of this seemingly insignificant scene in which nothing is really done and nothing is spoken, Elin is committed to her love for Agnes. Everything that has been ambiguous about her, all her wavering and shying away falls away from her. That does not mean that she is not afraid any more or that it all gets easy for her, but she has taken her decision. She has committed. This commitment is never outspoken in the dialogue of the film, but you don't need film characters loudly declaring what's going on inside them and explaining the meaning of their actions if you've got a writer like Moodysson and an actress like Dahlström. The person who returns from the bridge to her family's flat (where the others are still hanging around and once more talk about mobile phones) just isn't the aimlessly quarrelling, frustrated little girl from the beginning of the film any more. Elin has not only accepted what it is that she wants, she is now ready to fight for actually getting it. And so she comes over Åmål like the angel of revenge, ready to conquer anyone who dares to stand in her way – which happens to be Marcus, who is, as Anthony has remarked, a more than thankful victim, while poor but clumsy Johan gets mercilessly executed as well in the process. Alexandra Dahlström is irresistible in that scene and more beautiful than in any other moment of the film. We see a prosecutor who finally brings Åmål to trial, and neither of the two boys who have to stand in as the accused here has the intellectual standing to defend himself against Elin's cross-examination. Elin is cold in that moment and sharp as a knife, and her judgement is this: »*Du är så jävla dum i huvet!*« Neither Marcus nor Johan are personally involved here, Elin doesn't care enough about either of them. No, this is her final judgment on Åmål itself. In that moment, she has left the place and she doesn't hide it. She does not conceal her difference any more. That's why her way of breaking with Johan is so brutally short and cold.

She turns and leaves, only to phone Johan on Marcus's beloved mobile from the room next door. In a matter-of-fact voice with no audible feeling of regret she states: »I don't want to be together with you anymore. It's over. You can go home now.«

The final part of the picture comes two scenes later, when, after demonstrating her change in character to Jessica on the playground, Elin phones Johan again.

She's gentler and even comforting this time, but now even more outspoken on what is going on: »I just want to say that... I think you are very nice and so on. But... but it's just that I am... I am in love with someone else.« We do not need to hear the answer to Johan's question, »And who is that?« We wouldn't even have to see how, in the next scene, Elin is lying on her bed, longingly looking at Agnes's picture in the school yearbook. It is all clear now. Elin has committed to Agnes.

And it is of vital importance to realize that by telling Johan the reason behind her breaking up with him, she has already begun to tear down the bridges back into her old life. She could have kept it secret, she could have said, »I ditched him just because he was an idiot«, just like she used to say. But she doesn't. She prepares for her leap of faith. In fact, she is already taking a run.

And what about Agnes? Doesn't she have anything to do? Is she dancing the *pas de deux* with Elin too? Or is she, as some have said, a character that is basically static and doesn't undergo any development during the course of the story? Definitely not. I have already pointed out some aspects of the way that getting to know Elin changes Agnes. But concerning the dance, it is important not to forget that, despite the fact that Agnes loves Elin from the very first moment of the film, being secretly in love with someone is not the same as committing to her. Sure, Agnes never seems to waiver in her love for Elin, but her

attitude towards her is dynamic, a subtle movement of extending and withdrawing faith in her. Agnes too has a road to travel and a leap of faith to take. More than one leap of faith, actually. Just how many times does Agnes trust Elin and trust her again, regardless? Remember the very first time the two are actually together in Agnes's room in the night of her birthday.

Agnes, at this point, is already severely hurt and humiliated by having lost the long, dogged fight against her mother over her birthday party with all its catastrophic consequences. She has even lost the last battle against her mother who high-handedly decides to invite the late-coming, unknown guests in. Returning from the bathroom where she tried to remove the traces of her tears, Agnes is shocked to learn that the girl she secretly loves has arrived with her sister and has locked Agnes out from her very own room. But when Elin asks Agnes to sit down beside her on the bed because she wants to »tell her something« that Jessica shouldn't hear, Agnes's confusion turns into bewilderment. Sparks of a mad hope are warring against signs of fear and doubt in Agnes's face. Helplessly and almost beseechingly she tries to find out what Elin is up to. As she hesitatingly sits down next to her, she gets cruelly betrayed. Elin suddenly grabs her head and presses her lips on hers. Seconds later, the two giggling sisters run down the stairs and out of the house and Jessica hands Elin over the money she won. Agnes, who has heard Jessica's comments, is left behind, a trembling picture of misery. After faking a stiff upper lip in front of her parents with great difficulty, she later locks herself in her room and tries to commit suicide with a razor blade.

Agnes is wounded to the point of truly believing that she cannot go on living. She has been terribly cruel herself earlier that evening, but she pays for it bitterly. Indeed, it is hard to think of a more devastating kind of humiliation: The person you love asks you to place your confidence in her, and when you hesitatingly give yourself over, she laughs in your face and lets you know that she was making fun of you in order to earn some bucks on a bet. This nightmarish experience has left Agnes longing for death. But while this could be the tragic turning point of another kind of film, it is not this one. In the very darkest moment, hope dawns: When Elin makes up her mind and leaves Christian's party to return to Agnes's home, things take a different turn. Moodysson captures this turn in one of his most beautiful shots, deeply moving and dignified, and yet finely ironic and light-hearted at the same time:

In the very moment that Agnes searches the bathroom for the razors to cut her wrist, set to the solemn and sombre music of Albinoni, there, over the bridge across the road that leads to Agnes' home, we see Elin slowly approaching on the horizon from afar, coming closer and closer like John Wayne on a white horse riding into town. But alas, a poor kind of hero that is: Small and insignificant, lost in the harsh light of a street lamp, unsure of herself, half-drunk, tired and freezing to death, Elin faces her challenge and returns.

Just imagine how much strength it must take Agnes to step out on the balcony and face her tormentor at all, after all she did to her only hours ago.

Without saying a single word, she listens to Elin's rather forced apology and her plea to let her in. She hesitates for an agonizingly long time. It is sheer magic to watch Rebecca Liljeberg in this scene, embodying Agnes's anguish without actually seeming to *do* anything. It all comes alive in her beautiful face: Agnes's contempt and hatred for Elin, the naked fear of making herself vulnerable again, her mistrust and uncertainty what to believe and what to do, and yet, irresistibly, approaching like a mighty wave when the flood comes, her longing to be near her, no matter at what cost.

When Agnes finally looks up to the sky and hesitantly says »Okay...«, she probably knows that she should not do this by any reason. She just gives in to her heart and lets it happen: She takes the leap of faith again and believes in Elin, even after doing so brought her to the edge of suicide. And her courage seems infinite, for she will do it again, and again: She will phone Elin after the latter has failed to keep her promise of calling, she will walk up to Elin in school even after the latter has refused to talk to her on the phone, she will try to talk to Elin in the cafeteria even after Elin has ignored her on the school corridor. So it is not the case that Agnes stays out of the dance, that she is passive and undergoes no development. Her development is just very different from Elin's: Elin's story is about how she turns from just looking for a thrill to really being in love with Agnes and how she slowly garners the courage and strength to overcome her fears and openly commit to this love. Agnes however has already been committed all the time, so to speak, so her story is rather about the courage and strength it takes to keep a commitment alive against all odds, to keep believing, in an endless series of ever painful letdowns and renewed leaps of faith, even if it hurts so much that the heart may break asunder.

All in all, I think that nothing could be further off the mark than the claim that there is no intelligible development of Agnes's and Elin's story, that *Fucking Åmål* fails in giving credibility to the idea that Elin may give it all up for Agnes, so that the happy ending of the film is underdeveloped and just not credible. All complaints in that vein seem to me to rest on the same kind of mistake, they underestimate the complexity of Lukas Moodysson's script. *Fucking Åmål* tells a simple story, but a simple story does not have to be simplistically told. One has to realize how apt Marc Savlov's metaphor of a *pas de deux* is, since Agnes and Elin *are* dancing with each other all the time, even though they hardly meet. Agnes's patience as well as Elin's whirling around, her final coming to rest and determination are always linked up with their thoughts of the other one and what they learn and realize about the other one's feelings. In the context of Agnes's and Elin's intricate dance and with Elin's words in mind, »I always get what I want? – But grow up! – I'm in love with someone else«, does the end of the film make perfect sense.

Let me summarize my point like this: The third thing that is so special about Agnes's and Elin's story is how marvellously it shows that letting yourself fall in love means committing yourself unconditionally. Love doesn't compare. It doesn't calculate. When you fall in love, there's no haggling. Falling in love means putting it all at stake or staying out of the game. You take a leap of faith or you don't. Anything else, at this stage, is just fraud. Again, just to have a short name for this idea, let us call this the notion of commitment. And so this is the third thing that *Fucking Åmål* is about: *It's all about commitment, about finding the courage to believe that the one you love will be there to catch you when you leap.* And again, this is not trivial. It is not something that is inherent in just any love story, because you need a certain kind of romanticism to believe in this kind of commitment at all, and this kind of romanticism seems to have been largely extinct from current film-making (or turned into a schmaltzy caricature, which is even worse). *Fucking Åmål* is one of the few films that succeed in making us believe in the possibility of two lovers who, each in her very own way, realize that they love each other and muster the courage to commit to this love without pretence. When it comes to explaining why *Fucking Åmål* is such an amazingly powerful and moving love story, this is the third part of my answer.



## 6. Redemption

It's all about identity, it's all about recognition, and it's all about commitment. And now I'm almost finished. I only have to collect the threads I've been spinning to (at last) give my final answer to the question why I am in love with this glorious film. I will do that by focussing exclusively on the undisputed climax, the coming out scene. This scene brings all the themes I have considered so far together and galvanizes them into that overwhelming feeling of bliss with which we leave the theatre. It is the scene of the final commitment of Agnes and Elin to each other. Structurally speaking, it ends the film, despite the delightful little coda that is to follow. Since it is so intricately written by Lukas Moodysson and so overwhelmingly acted out by Alexandra Dahlström and Rebecka Liljeberg, I will describe it almost second by second.

After Elin has been secretly waiting for Agnes to leave the cafeteria, she runs up to her from behind, grabs her arm, pushes her into a little, red-lit women's closet and locks the door. While Agnes protests furiously, Elin tries to calm her down and make her listen, until at last Agnes leans against the rear wall of the toilet with arms crossed, flashes looks of contempt at Elin and snarls: »And, what is it that you want to say?« With her eyes fixed on the ground and in a faltering voice, Elin confesses that it was her who threw the stone that broke Agnes's window the night before. Agnes seems surprised, she has not expected this kind of avowal. Quietly, Elin continues: »Now for sure you think that I think that you are bad, but that's not so. Exactly to the contrary.« On hearing these words, Agnes looks up infinitely slowly, searching Elin's face with breathless intensity to try to confirm whether she can trust her ears. When Elin closes with, »In fact, I think that you... that you are good«, Agnes visibly has to fight against her inclination to give in to Elin's avowals again. She desperately struggles to cling to her defences and tries to sound dismissive as she asks, »Are you having me on?«. But Elin completely lays herself bare and defenceless against Agnes's suspicious glances and pleads: »No, this is serious!... I have ... I have been thinking ... and things ... a lot ... about you.« We hear the pain in her voice and we hear that she is honest, and Agnes hears it too, because this phrase cracks her shell. Her vow not to let Elin trample on her feelings once more simply gets blown to pieces by a sudden wave of affection carrying a tiny trace of hope. »Have you?«, she asks, taking a quick breath. After a second, in a last surge of resistance she whispers: »If you fool me once more, I'm going to kill you.« – »But I don't, I will not fool you«, Elin vows, shaking her head. There is a long pause in which Elin garners her strength to at last take the leap.

What follows is the final decisive sequence of the film and it is nearly impossible to capture the incredible richness that Dahlström's and Liljeberg's acting bestows on their characters in the following moments. Faces, emotions, looks and tones of voice change as easy as the wink of an eye, and both actresses display such an awesome power and yet such a delicate sweetness of expression in their performances that one could spend page after page describing what can be seen on the screen.

After pausing for some moments, Elin at last takes her final run: »Is it true that you... Victoria said that you are... in love with me?« When Victoria's name is mentioned, Agnes's eyes turn wide and her head soars up, she intensely searches Elin's face, who keeps looking down. There is terror in Agnes's eyes, she has a foreboding of what's going to come. After all, Victoria threatened her with letting out her greatest secret. She thinks frantically, but Elin is on the home stretch now, and though her head is still bent down and her voice hardly audible, she is getting faster and faster as the words

finally come to her: »Because ... if you are.... *so am I...* with you, that is.« The last words sound relieved, even scented with a pinch of humour as Elin adds what goes without saying and finally looks up. She has done it. She has leapt the abyss. But Agnes's eyes have turned into two huge black seas of bewilderment – for a second, she is clearly uncertain if she can get through this. Her face is a silent cry for help: What is going on here? *What shall I do?* But then, as if she had received an answer, she calms down, her whole air changes from turmoil to tranquillity. As if someone had whispered in her ear that this is the moment that will end it all, for heaven or hell, and that she cannot do anything but face it, her features relax. The quiet strength she has shown throughout returns to her, she fixes her eyes on Elin openly now, with a little smile, waiting, abandoning herself to whatever is to come. After some moments, Elin shyly asks: »Are you?« In that second, Agnes's gaze is full of relief, even happiness. When she nods, it is faintly visible, but you don't have to see the movement of her head, you just have to look into those shining eyes.

Remember that this is a leap of faith for Agnes too: It is actually the first time that she directly admits her love for Elin to anyone except to her secret diary. Again, this is a reciprocal declaration of love.

It is Camilla who destroys this magic moment by banging on the toilet door from outside. After a second of terror, Elin mutters, »I will just...«, and steals herself out of the closet, blocking the entrance for Camilla. In the ensuing quarrel, Elin tries to convince her that the toilet is broken and that she better look for another one. But her behaviour is just too strange and Camilla, who is mean but not stupid, immediately senses that Elin is hiding something – or rather, someone – in the toilet. So, with a sly, »Okay, I understand!«, she turns and calls Jessica and the other girls: »Come over here! Elin has got a guy here in the toilet!« Elin, protesting panically, retreats to the toilet and locks the door again from inside. A crowd of people start to gather outside – Jessica, Elin's friends, more and more students, girls and boys, who start banging on the door, while Camilla keeps shouting, »Open the door, Elin! We want to know who's inside there with you!« The rest of the scene takes place with their mindless noise invading the secluded little cabin like a rising cry of war from an enemy army encircling a doomed mountain stronghold.

Note how exactly this development mirrors the previous turning points of the story: Just when it gets serious between Agnes and Elin, the world intrudes on them, and Elin, overwhelmed by fear, gives in. That's how it was when the Saab's driver stuck his head into the car and destroyed the magic of their kiss, that's how it was when Jessica interrupted Elin's only attempt to get in touch with Agnes. This time it's Camilla, and at first it looks as if the story was about to repeat itself again. Elin's fear of losing it all, of ending her world, crushes her. Although it was *her* again who took the initiative, she suddenly seems devoid of all courage.

She leans against the cabin door, paralyzed, looking exhausted and hardly able to stand on her feet like after a terribly long run. She frantically thinks about something she could tell to the people outside to save herself. »What shall we do?«, she asks, frightened. »Maybe if we tell them that we just wanted.... No, I don't know.«

Although Elin has already declared being in love, she is again on the brink of withdrawing, of giving in and returning to fucking Åmål. This is what makes her so lovable: She is so much like us. But this time, history does not repeat itself. It is Agnes who makes the difference.

While Elin is calculating her chances of getting out of the situation, Agnes is patiently sitting on the toilet, not scared at all. With a rather amused little smile around her lips, she watches Elin's wriggling. She is beyond a state of mind where whatever the gang

outside could say to her could bother her in any way, and so she remarks: »We can't sit here in the toilet all day. That's sick.« – »But what shall we do?«, asks Elin. »We go out of course!«, answers Agnes, innocently, while the noise from outside is growing louder and louder. Johan arrives and leaves again, shocked by the news that, apparently, Elin is publicly making out with another guy. The turmoil outside the cabin resembles a football stadium just seconds before a penalty in the final moments of the match. Inside, Agnes stands up and gets resolute: »Come on now. We go out« she says, pointing to the door with her head. Elin still leans against the door as if she wanted to protect it against Agnes's determination. She looks miserable. With a heartbreaking sigh, she exclaims »But...!«, as if she was to burst into tears. There is everything about her in this »but!« – her fear of losing a world she thoroughly despises but which is still the only world she has ever known. I *cannot* do this, she seems to be saying, because it would change *everything*.

This little moment of only a few seconds is like a microcosm of the entire film. All its conflict boils down to a final moment bursting with tension. In that decisive moment, when everything could be lost, Agnes saves Elin's life. Right when Elin is in imminent danger of crashing down, she stretches out her hand to catch her:

The tone of her voice is calm and pleading as she asks: »Did you really mean what you said before?« She looks at Elin earnestly as if she wanted to lift her over the abyss by reminding her of what drove her in there, into that closet. Elin stares to the ground, motionless, wordless. Time stands still. After endless seconds, she finally looks up, looks into Agnes's eyes, shy, fearful, as if awaiting final rejection, and, with her voice almost cracking, whispers: »Yes...«.

It is close to impossible to put into words what happens in Agnes's face in this moment. If ever an actress has succeeded in embodying the meaning of the word *redemption* in her eyes and smile, then Rebecka Liljeberg has. This is the moment in which the film culminates.

The way Agnes looks around, as if an invisible crowd of witnesses should recognize and remember this moment of bliss for her, then looks up to the ceiling for a second as if to thank the heavens above for her triumph, and finally lays her dark, loving eyes to rest on her beloved is so incredibly graceful the heart may stop beating. Whispering »You...«, she gently bends her head and tenderly strokes a little blond lock of Elin's behind her ear. This delicate gesture is the only form of corporeal caress between Agnes and Elin that FA ever offers us to testify to the reality of their love, but it's all anyone could wish for. For in that moment, Elin looks up, and now Dahlström performs a little miracle that stands up to comparison with Liljeberg's greatest moment just seconds before: Elin throws a glance at Agnes, a long and longing, searching, hoping glance of thankfulness, until a fragile, lovely smile begins to play around her lips. She knows that it has happened. She knows that she has leapt and that they have finally met, and that she would not have made it without Agnes. This is the moment when Elin finds redemption too.

This scene ranks high among the most beautiful love scenes I know of. You may watch it a dozen times and still discover something new and unseen in it. It shows Dahlström and Liljeberg at the peak of their art and the sparkling chemistry between them. Lukas Moodysson, when asked at the Berlin Film Festival in 1999 if it was difficult to find the leading actresses for his film, said: »We had our eyes on these two. We knew that each one of them was perfect separately... we just had to find out that they were the perfect couple.« Here, one simply sees why.

The coming out scene has been termed a »resurrection«, which I find a bit overstressed. But it certainly is the depiction of a transformation, of what is called a *rite de passage*. Rites of passage are rituals that structure the border between childhood and adulthood,

for example. They follow a universal pattern: Youths are (symbolically) separated from the rest of their community for a certain time to pass certain trials of courage, and when they successfully return, they are henceforth considered full members of their community. A boy walks into the jungle, a man returns from it. He has shaken off his childhood and may even call himself by a new name from now on. He has in fact been *reborn*, so the seclusion he has to undergo has sometimes been interpreted as a symbolic return to the mother's womb. What happens in the coming out scene surely is such a passage.<sup>22</sup> When Agnes and Elin unlock the door and step out of the closet, they have transformed each other and themselves. Two frightened girls entered the toilet, two proud lovers leave it.

We see Elin lay her one hand on the door handle and the other one on the key, we see her take a last, deep breath, we see Agnes take her stand behind Elin as if to hold her when the storm is going break loose. When the door opens, the two appear from their warm-lit, womb-like seclusion into the bright day of the school corridor – and nothing is ever going to be the same. Elin's face is confident and self-assured as never before, she smiles broadly and looks as sexy and ironic as she has ever wanted to be as she says her memorable lines: »Ta-damm! Here I am! And this is my new girlfriend. Would you please move aside? We are going to have a fuck.« She leads Agnes through the dumb-struck crowd like Moses passing through the Red Sea. Hand in hand, laughing and smiling at each other, Agnes and Elin walk through the corridor, out of the school, over the schoolyard and away.

In this *grande finale*, all the three moments of Agnes's and Elin's love are fused into one: Their commitment to each other, their choice to stand by each other and face the world together, is made visible when they step out of the dark and into the light. Their reciprocal recognition and need for each other is beautifully brought out by the inner dynamics of the scene. For, if it wasn't for Elin, they would have never got into the toilet, but if it wasn't for Agnes, they would have never got out. And finally, their courage to be themselves, to run free of fucking Åmål (the state of mind), is shown in their walking out of the school hand in hand. Whatever happens, wherever they go and no matter how long they will go together, a new chapter of their lives has begun. They have walked out of »Åmål« with a smile and there is no way back.

Again, let me summarize my point by finding a short and handy name for what the final scene of the film has got to tell us. I already mentioned it before: What the ending of the film bestows on Agnes and Elin is *redemption*. They have redeemed each other. If you cannot see that in their glances as they look at each other right before they open the door, if you cannot sense it in their smiles as they walk away, you might find it in the final coda that follows the coming out scene: We see Agnes and Elin in broad daylight, right there in Elin's and Jessica's room and actually getting along, being happy together. They seem to exchange the kind of nonsensical chitchat of two lovers who are just happy to talk and don't care what they actually say. But what is said is not *that* meaningless:

What Elin describes to Agnes is a scene like the one that introduced her to us for the first time, when she got mad at Jessica having used up the chocolate milk, took her glass of O'boy and poured it all over her. Now she tells Agnes how *she* used to take way too much O'boy and how Jessica used to freak out. And one can easily imagine Elin getting so furious as to smash all those smaller, even-sized and bigger glasses of chocolate milk she has produced in vain.

But then, smilingly, she closes with that charming »But that doesn't matter« – meaning that these days are over now that Agnes is sitting here with her –, while the last look that Agnes

<sup>22</sup> I can't help noticing the strange red light inside the closet that has it appear as an otherworldly room, visibly set apart from the rage of the world outside like some kind of warm, corporeal cave.

throws at Elin just before the picture disappears is surely »as cute as it gets«, as someone on *imdb.com* put it. The peacefulness and gentleness of this last moment stands in such sharp contrast to the entire film before that it obviously has to be read as a promise of the possibility to attain a state of paradise, a state of redemption, in the name of love. For those ready to search for identity, to find recognition, and to extend commitment, love's labour is not lost. They may find redemption. When it comes to understanding why *Fucking Åmål* is such a life-longing and heart-warming story of love, this is the last part of my answer: *It's all about redemption.*

And that, finally, is what it's all about.

(Alright).

## 7. With God and Wilde on His Side

*Fucking Åmål* is one of the most beautiful stories about falling in love that you're ever likely to see, and Lukas Moodysson is one of the great romantics among the film-makers of our time. That is what sets him apart from the crowd of sceptics and cynics like Larry Clark, Lars von Trier, Todd Solondz and Mike Leigh.<sup>23</sup> However, what makes Moodysson almost unique is that he has understood that being seriously romantic does not have to preclude one from being light-heartedly ironic. There is a certain idea that believing in the reality of great romantic ideals must inevitably lead to pretentious and unctuous preaching, that it must prevent one from gently acknowledging the tragicomic ways in which human attempts to realize these ideals can and mostly do fail. But that idea is just blatantly wrong. The old romanticists literally *invented* irony, and Lukas Moodysson is their true follower. That is what sets him apart from many of his fellow romantics such as Thomas Vinterberg, Tom Tykwer, Leos Carax and Richard Linklater.<sup>24</sup> Moodysson knows that he will always win, as long as Keats and Yeats are on their side but Wilde is on his.

I have tried to present my reading of Moodysson's *Fucking Åmål*, to explain what I see in it and why I love it so much. I presume that some will find my reading strangely exaggerated, maybe even eccentric – isn't this, after all, a *teen comedy* about *growing up* in some dead-end place in *Sweden*?

But I have deliberately tried to carve out the issues *Fucking Åmål* deals with in a way that has little to do with how old the protagonists are or where they are at home. I do in fact believe that the teenage thing in *Fucking Åmål* is as neglectable as the fact that the film is set in a one-horse town, in Sweden or elsewhere (remember Tonio Kröger). That's the first reason why I've been using all those rather pretentious concepts, like *identity*, *recognition*, *commitment* and *redemption*.<sup>25</sup> The second reason is that I didn't want to slip into triviality. One could be content with declaring that *Fucking Åmål* is about *love, love, love* and nothing more, but that wouldn't be particularly illuminating. »Love«, like any grand concept, is infinite, and infinitely many equally beautiful stories about its countless aspects can be told: For example, *Fucking Åmål* tells about the power of falling in love, but it doesn't deal with

<sup>23</sup> Concerning Leigh, I'm obviously thinking of films like *Naked* here, not like *Secrets and Lies*.

<sup>24</sup> Maybe the only contemporary director congenial to him in that respect is the later Pedro Almodóvar.

<sup>25</sup> Please remember that this is not meant to be any kind of absolute judgment. This is how *I* read the film, it's what it has got to tell *me*. There are always other, equally possible readings, even though I do think that I can defend mine quite well. I would argue that *Fucking Åmål* would have *never* been loved so deeply by so many if it were just one more of those nostalgic coming of age films (»*Back then, I've had the time of my life!*«). Instead, it has got something to tell me, right here, right now, even as a non-teen, non-gay, non-girl, non-Swedish and non-small town person. I have tried to bring out what it is.

the gentle craft of watching over it in the long, long stretches of the plain; it praises the achievement of identity, but not the warmth of a community to fall back on; it's about committing to someone you love, but doesn't speak about the challenge of humanely letting her go again, and it celebrates redemption, and not, for example, the great themes of heroic self-sacrifice or tragic downfall.

One of the more interesting consequences to be drawn from this reading of *Fucking Amål* concerns the range of films that I am inclined to compare it to. By now, it should come as no surprise that it's not specifically teen or even coming of age films that come to my mind. Rather, it's a type of film that explores the possibilities of finding love and friendship under various favourable or unfavourable conditions, and of balancing the thin, sometimes blurred line between them. It is quite interesting to think about which films show up as close relatives of *Fucking Amål* when seen from this perspective. I could list a random selection, Louis Malle's 1987 masterpiece *Au revoir les enfants* and (more recently) Dom Rotheroe's powerful *My Brother Tom* (2001) among them, but instead I will mention just two: First, the only film in recent years that has made me love life maybe as much as *Fucking Amål*, Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*. This is the story of an unlikely couple as well, brilliantly embodied by Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson: Bob, an ageing film star, and Charlotte, a young woman who has just graduated from university and doesn't really know what to do with her life. Both are married to someone else. The film tells how they meet in an anonymous luxury hotel in Tokyo and how they find and recognize each other. The concept of difference plays a vital role for the film. But most of all, the ending resembles *Fucking Amål* in its depiction of the possibility of redemption that love may bring, even though Bob and Charlotte don't walk away into a shared future. Here, redemption comes with finding the right words and the right gestures at the right time to end an agonizing state of speechlessness. For after developing a deep friendship that is so beautiful because it is based on the unspoken promise that it is *not* going to turn into something more although it *could* do so any second, Bob and Charlotte have to part in the end. But Bob, being afraid to touch her, screws up their goodbye. They stand in front of each other in the hotel lobby, exchanging helpless glances, until at last, deeply hurt, she utters a matter-of-fact »Well, bye then«, turns and walks away, while Bob looks on, on the verge of bursting into tears. Later, when he is already on his way to the airport and his taxi cab stops at a traffic light, he detects her on the sidewalk. Only then does he understand, leaps from the taxi and runs after her, until, in the middle of thousands of people strolling through a pedestrian mall, he stops her and just takes her in his arms. He gently strokes her hair and whispers something in her ear that we never get to hear, we only see her start to cry and laugh at the same time and we see the one long, loving kiss they share. Then they say goodbye again, but this time with a smile, redeemed. When Bob returns to his taxi, he looks relieved, nods at the driver and just sighs: »Alright.« And that's the final comment on what he has experienced, much like »...but that doesn't matter.«

The second film I want to mention as akin to *Fucking Amål* is the magnificent *Magnolia* (1999) by Paul Thomas Anderson (another Guldbagge winner, by the way). This large-scale work, composed around a brilliant song circle by Aimée Mann, masterfully interweaves several stories twining around the central theme of guilt, of sinning against those you love, and of the power of forgiveness and redemption. I have found Agnes and Elin in this film, in the rather unlikely disguise of Jim (fabulous John C. Reilly), a devout L.A. police officer, and Claudia (Melora Walters), a young woman who as a child was sexually abused by her father and now struggles to rescue herself from the ruins of a life scarred by terror, loneliness, and hard drugs. These two recognize each other immediately but have to fight a hard battle for achieving their love, as Claudia seems already too weak and disheartened to take her chance and put her confidence in Jim, while he is just a little too clumsy and shy to convince her to take that leap of faith. *Magnolia* was shot between January and

July 1999, so it is extremely unlikely that Anderson knew *Fucking Åmål* when he was working on it, but I will cling to the idea that he did until someone proves me wrong, for *Magnolia*'s very ending strikes me as an obvious quote from *Fucking Åmål*: After a dramatic night that brings redemption to nearly all the protagonists (with the exception of Claudia's father, who dies alone and dishonoured), Claudia is sitting on her bed in the light of a new morning, her face lowered and covered with tears. We hear Jim talk in a soft, comforting voice, but (again) we cannot understand what he says. There is just the promise that he has found the right words to say, as in the end, she slowly lifts her head, looks him in the eye, and, at last, smiles at him calmly and trustfully, believing, as it seems, for the first time. And right into that last, beautiful and heart-warming smile of love the final song fades up, there's a sudden cut to a black screen and the credits. I guess that sounds familiar.

The last thing I want to point out is that one of the most fascinating elements of Anderson's film is that he very explicitly spells out the *religious* dimension of the idea of redemption, most famously in the scene when a biblical hail of millions of living frogs goes down on Los Angeles like one of the seven plagues God sent to Pharaoh in *Exodus*. Love clearly has a divine dimension in *Magnolia*, a dimension which seems absent from *Fucking Åmål*, although I have tried to read some secularized traces of it into the film by employing the notion of redemption. It is however interesting to note that Lukas Moodysson has followed a similar route like Anderson in his other masterpiece, *Lilja 4-ever*. This film seems to be just the exact opposite to *Fucking Åmål* in every single respect.<sup>26</sup> It even seems difficult not to get cynical about films like *Fucking Åmål* in the face of the picture of the state of the world that *Lilja 4-ever* paints. But in fact the two films do have something in common thematically. For all of Moodysson's films so far are what I would call explorations of the possibility of love (this holds equally for *Tillsammans!* and *Ett hål i mitt hjärta*) whose initial conditions seem to get bleaker every time. But even in *Lilja 4-ever* there is the notion of unconditional commitment between human beings, the idea of forgiveness for indifference and treason and the hope for a kind of love and faith that will transcend meanness and evil. The difference is just that in Lilja's world, this love can only be realized as a religious utopia. While Agnes and Elin succeed in saving each other, redemption cannot be had for Lilja and Volodya. While there is a way out of Åmål for Agnes and Elin, there is no such way out for Lilja and Volodya except the one they actually take, committing suicide. Only as angels, symbols of innocence equipped with those tragicomic little feathery wings, can they enjoy some moments of bliss. When life on Earth turns to hell, the possibility of love gets exiled into heaven. But even in the brutal wasteland of human exploitation that Lilja's story is set to you may still find hints that it could have been possible after all – as in Lilja's dream that shows how easy it could have been to send Andrzej away and plant some seeds of human kindness even in her world.

So I claim that it is seriously wrong to think that, after making some playful romantic comedies, Moodysson »turned serious« in his last films. For I believe that he was serious already when he made *Fucking Åmål* (and indeed, *What is so funny about peace, love and understanding?*). Indeed I'd say that you can only understand the rage and the painfulness of films like *Lilja 4-ever* and *Ett hål i mitt hjärta* if you see them as born from the agony of a romantic who has been wounded to death. What these films articulate is the relentless accusation of a world in which romanticism is bound to die, because everything that is holy and beautiful about life gets destroyed when children are mentally and physically tortured, mutilated and murdered. *Lilja 4-ever* and *Ett hål i mitt hjärta* show a world in which stories like that of Agnes and Elin won't happen anymore, because human beings like them, dignified and gifted with the power to love, cannot grow and survive in it. *Fucking Åmål* is a story about

<sup>26</sup> Although I would say that *Fucking Åmål* is not in fact the most easy, light-hearted film that Moodysson has made, as *Tillsammans!* is much more harmonious and optimistic. *Tillsammans!* is rightly labelled a comedy, whereas in the case of *Fucking Åmål* I'm not so sure.

something that has already and forever been lost to Tess and Eric, to Lilja and Volodya. That's why these films belong together. What *Fucking Åmål* shows is what it is that we are about to destroy. The world as it is shown in *Lilja 4-ever* and *Ett hål i mitt hjärta* shows what will become of Agnes's and Elin's world if we do not act up. In fact, Lilja's and Tess's world *is* nothing but Agnes's and Elin's world (our world, that is), it's just its downside. This is what makes both films so terrifying: The hell-like apartment that *Ett hål i mitt hjärta* is set to could be right next to Elin's and Jessica's apartment, right there in Åmål. The men who rape Lilja could be the teachers and fathers of Agnes's and Elin's classmates. One could get the impression that Moodysson, in *Lilja 4-ever*, alludes to this point by again choosing a road bridge, just like the one in *Fucking Åmål*, as the location for the turning point of the story.

Films like *Lilja 4-ever* may make you feel that the world is sick and cursed and fantasize about blowing it all to pieces, while a film like *Fucking Åmål* can make you believe that a world in which stories like that are actually possible cannot be a bad place after all. If we ask, which one of the two speaks the truth, there is just one answer: Unfortunately, they both do. But then again: *Fortunately*, they both do. That's why I have gone out of my way to argue that the story of *Fucking Åmål* really is truthful, consequential, and credible, no less so than *Lilja 4-ever*. Only if you see these films as belonging together can you get at the lesson to be drawn from Lukas Moodysson's films: As romantics, and even as ironists, and anyway as human beings, it is our fucking duty to fight for a world in which stories like Agnes's and Elin's can happen and stories like Lilja's and Volodya's cannot. As Volodya puts it: »This life is the only thing that is yours. Death is forever, but life is damned short.«

## 8. *Fem tusen kilo O'boy*

And now, I'm finished. Thank you for still being with me.

But, I hear you say, is that all? Didn't you set out to explain why it is that people all over the world *fall in love* with *Fucking Åmål*? Wasn't that your question? But all you have done is to describe what you think the film has got to tell us and how he tells it. So what have you actually done in order to explain the unique appeal of *Fucking Åmål*?

Well, you're right. The last bit is still missing. However, I do believe that what I have written so far really *nearly* explains it all. The things I have described are what makes people feel that *Fucking Åmål* teaches or reminds them what love really is all about. If you agree with me in that, the rest is easy:

First, the film tells its story in such a low-key, understated mood that it is impossible for us not to connect. The characters are so believable and close to us that we immediately get the impression that we've known them all along, or even that we ourselves once were or still are just like them. That's why so many people have said that *Fucking Åmål* feels so true, so real, almost like a documentary. Of course, the film's distinctive visual style, of which I have been silent, plays a vital role for the creation of that feeling.

Secondly, this is the reason why the film immediately invites us to compare ourselves to the characters. Inescapably, it makes us ask ourselves if we would have been as brave as Elin, or as tough and patient as Agnes. Would we have met the challenge? Would we have lived up to a call of love if it had meant to break away from everything we had known so far? This question goes directly to the heart, and that's why so many people feel that *Fucking Åmål* touches and moves them like few other films, and even that it has made them look at their lives differently.

Thirdly and lastly, the film's happy ending constitutes a message for us, no matter how we personally would answer the question. What it says is: You *can* do it. Because you



didn't see two international moral superheroes, you saw two ordinary girls, weak, human, scared, just like you in every respect. If they can, you can. And so the film constitutes a promise: Go and do likewise, and you *will* find redemption (and, possibly, be Miss Sweden). And that is why so many people have stated that *Fucking Åmål* feels so incredibly uplifting, heart-warming and life-longing that it makes you leave the theatre feeling like a better person, ready to embrace love wherever you find it.

And that's it. That's why it's the miracle it is.

You may now cry out in disbelief: »Is that all you've got to tell us? This is your answer after more than thirty pages, after all these *words* and *words* and *words* and still *more words*?« Well, ... yes. Sorry to disappoint you. I know, my answer is hardly original. But, as the late great Douglas Adams used to point out, in order to understand the significance of an answer, it is a good idea to make sure that you understood what exactly the question was. To this I would like to add that in order to understand the significance of anything, one has to understand the kind of *reasons* one could give for judging whether it is sensible or not. So while my answer may look like old hat, some of the reasons I have developed to back it up may after all make it at least a little illuminating. I hope they do.

If not, all that has happened is that *a lot* of O'boy has been produced, showing nothing but its author's love and admiration for a great, beautiful, wonderful film.

*Men det gör ingenting.*<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Written every now and then between November 2004 and April 2005; published online at <http://www.people.freenet.de/what-its-all-about/>, May 5th 2005. In writing this text, I have heavily relied on internet resources, above all on *imdb.com* and other sites dedicated to cinema and film in general. But I would not have come far without the sites specifically dedicated to *Fucking Åmål* and its creators. They provided me with immeasurably helpful things like the English and Swedish film scripts, translations of interviews and reviews, sound and video files, and so on. I therefore want to thank the webmasters and moderators of the following sites: <http://oebfa.com>, <http://www.fucking-amal.com>, <http://www.rebecca-liljeberg.com>, <http://www.alexandra-dahlstrom.com>, <http://www.eratosthenese.com/showmelove/>, <http://amal.host.sk>, <http://www.algonet.se/~anderzb/rebecka.htm>; <http://mitglied.lycos.de/fisvo18/alex.htm>, <http://www.goodwin.ee/vidcaps.html>. A special mention must be made of three people: First, Ole Endre Bergerud (Norway), whose authoritative »review« of *Fucking Åmål* (to be found at <http://oebfa.com>) obviously deserves to count as the classic starting point for anybody who wants to learn about the film. Secondly, Peter Svensson (Sweden), whose powerful sketch for a sequel to *Fucking Åmål* (to be found at <http://members.home.nl/sydney1/fa/subpages/html/framescriptfa2.htm>) first made me think about coping with my enthusiasm for the film by writing something about it. And finally, a very special thank you goes to Anthony (England), whose essay *The Incredibly Beautiful Story of Two Girls in Love* (to be found at <http://www.eratosthenese.com/showmelove/script/beautifulstory.html>) is the most sensitive and insightful commentary on the film that I have come across. I found that in many cases he had reached the same conclusions as I had, and his text pointed me to things that I had overlooked in many others.